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The No Self, the Little Self, and the Poets

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Voltaire and His Biographers

LOUIS SIMPSON:
Realists

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Prelude to the Horizon of the Thirties

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To Our Readers

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RICHARD MOORE

The No Self, the Little Self, and the Poets

WHO AM I? What is this self I aggrandize and agonize over? Can it be that I am nobody, as Emily Dickinson suggests in that frog poem? She might have liked the idea of the No Self: the idea that our idea of the Self may be just that: only an idea. Something arbitrary, artificial, and therefore dispensable. The Yogis and the Buddhists have been telling us this for years now, and it seems to have sunk in. I think they have only helped us to a discovery that we were ripe to make for ourselves. Otherwise we would have refused to understand them.

Let us think of the various ways that a self can be defined: bodily pains and pleasures (I have good evidence that this was how Homer thought of the self); thoughts (*cogito ergo sum*, said Descartes; this intellectual being, those thoughts that wander through Eternity, said Milton's devil, Belial); actions (character isolated by deed, said Yeats). . . . There may be no end to such possible definitions. They may be as numberless as the numbers. So then, faced with this dubious variety, I accept the additional notion of the self as not there at all, the self as nothing—just as zero came to be regarded as a number in mathematics—and sit on the floor and cross my legs as snugly as they will comfortably go—like a Yogi. Why not? It was in India, after all, that zero was first accepted as a number. Sitting there in the silence of the night, I do nothing and, insofar as I am able, I think nothing. It's a good position to use once one gets used to it because the body can grow relaxed, forget its pains and pleasures for a while, and yet experience stays vivid. (The only other thoroughly relaxed and stable position is lying down, but with deep concentration this position tends toward drowsiness and blunted awareness.) To encourage the silence and the absence of thoughts, it

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helps to breathe very slowly, deeply and quietly and to count one's breaths, one to ten, one to ten. . . . In this state one stands a pretty good chance of directly experiencing that self which is no self, that nothing at all which remains when all the querulous somethings have ceased. As they say, it is all empty. Sometimes it is almost terrifying in its beauty.

Then, as when zero is accepted as a number in mathematics, all sorts of operations and representations become clear and possible that were impossible before. A relaxation and sureness come into life. A vividness enters the things we see, hear, and touch. Our skills increase. These effects have become commonplace—witness the vast success of the Maharishi Yogi's "Transcendental Meditation"—TM. A whole town in Vermont has taken up TM in the hope of decreasing its crime rate (or perhaps only in the hope of making the TV evening news); and a major league baseball team is trying to mix it in with batting practice. (O my Country, what is becoming of you?)

Even when the non-self does not directly appear in the quietness, it gains strength with the stilling of conventional self-concepts and exerts its beneficent influence. The result is curious: any task to be performed not only becomes easier, but also less important. We are able to solve the problem at precisely that moment when we have ceased to care whether we solve it or not. It must be that our difficulties with it resulted from our own desire. We were, in fact, not thinking about the problem but about our longing to solve it. That is, we were thinking about ourselves. In the meditation the self tends to vanish and with it the desire for a solution; and this frees us to lose ourselves in the problem without distraction.

But this non-self I have accepted will not do as a self in any ordinary way. It won't, for example, fit very well into the sentences I use, and the sentences, of course, are absolutely necessary because my experience is largely verbal—and social. What is man without society? A noble savage? A savage monster? Centuries of asking have produced a reasonably clear answer to this question. Such a man is impossible. He would be nothing at all. Just so. I have an inkling how marvelous it is to be nothing. But I am not ready for the jungle or the mountaintop. I sense that it would never work. Unlike the

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Buddha, I'd worry about what became of my wife and children. I'd wonder who, if anybody, was reading my poems. . . . So I have to be somebody with everybody else. There is no escape from it.

How is one to resolve such a conflict? Is there any way that the absence of the self—or perhaps some deft minimizing of the self—can be made to exist and function in ordinary social life? Is it not the ordinary life of our time, the crumbling of our civilized Cartesian world of "me" and "it," that has thrust such a need upon us? Let me discuss briefly my own experience. I think it may be meaningful generally.

Years ago in the public library in Hastings, England, I read for an hour or so in a book written by an American who had lived on the island of Luzon in the Philippines. I don't think I noticed any particular intensity at the time, but nothing in my mind has been quite the same since. I have tried unsuccessfully to relocate the book—knowing neither the title nor the author's name. Maybe there was no such book. Perhaps my need for it had become so great that it came into being for that reason only and has no other existence.

I had been pacing about the downs of Sussex, studying ancient Greek and giving way to my feeling that human mentality was decaying, had been decaying for a long time—20,000 years at least. Back then, before the invention of the wheel, the domestication of animals, and the sowing and harvesting of fields, human societies had been stable, had gone on, as their campsites show, substantially unchanged for hundreds of thousands of years. Signs pointed back to that time. There was the fantastic grammatical complexity of ancient Greek, the even greater complexity of Indo-European. This reminded me how the extremely primitive Australian aborigines also spoke languages as elaborate, complex and difficult as the rules and customs they lived by. All over the world languages seem to simplify with each "advance" in culture. The previous summer I had seen the prehistoric cave paintings at Lascaux. You actually have to see them in their caves to have any idea what they are like. The artists used the natural irregularities of the rock surface to bring out the features of the animal in a kind of relief effect. The imagination, color, and life of

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these paintings—or are they sculptures, shaped by the earth itself and merely found by the artist?—can carry one's wits away. Of one thing I was sure: in art for 20,000 years there had been no advance whatever.

I asked myself whether there had ever been a healthy society, one which did not thwart and destroy the men and women who composed it, and pictured an Old Stone Age tribe of hunters, painting in their caves and speaking an inconceivably elaborate language, their men killing great beasts with spears and incantations, their women gathering wild wheat and berries and finally betraying them by inventing agriculture. They had no money, owned no land, no animals; had no slaves, no machines. What sort of poets did they have to go with the pictures in their caves? Story-tellers, improvised epics, magic perceptions. . . . What ended those wonders? Someone invented the wheel, and a mere ten thousand years later, the wheel exploded over Hiroshima.

All this suggested a new interpretation of the Fall of Man. The Forbidden Fruit that Eve had offered to Adam had been agriculture. He accepted the temptation of a dependable food supply and lost his brotherhood with the beasts, whom he had tracked, killed, and whose hearts he had eaten. Along with agriculture Eve discovered the facts of fertility and fatherhood. The knowledge of Good and Evil mentioned in the Bible meant the knowledge of Birth and Death, our basic good and our basic evil. When man learned this, he could no longer make love innocently, and he covered himself in his guilt and shame. God no longer walked in the Garden because man was beginning to lose his magical imagination, having become an owner of land, a proprietor. The things we see—the land, the seasons, the animals—no longer moved in our depths, magic presences uniting men with what they see and sense in one reality. Henceforth man had to till the soil with his own sweat because the skill and art, the perilous ecstatic play of hunting, had become the monotony of the peasant's labor. And this labor, being unnatural to man, begot its opposite, leisure; for now there was a "tax base," and kings and princes were possible, and the armies to maintain them; and the thrill and danger of hunting returned in a marvelous new invention: war. Then invention followed invention in the

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exhaustible vain hope of making us all as leisured as the kings we worshiped. But leisure falsified and kept us from being men as surely as labor did. The means we used to get our leisure—slaves first and then later and more dangerously the machines with which we enslave nature itself—have debased us.

It was at this point that I encountered the book in the Hastings library. The American in Luzon speculatively compared three states of human development: urban civilization; the native tribal agricultural societies; and finally the small bands of Negritos in the jungles of the interior who had no fixed habitation and lived by hunting and gathering. He claimed that there were radically different mentalities and conceptions of the self associated with each of these states. I flipped straight to the Negritos.

The idea is very simple. Suppose you close your eyes and see some image—the rock, say, in your backyard on which you stubbed your toe yesterday. If you have not been playing with the dilemmas of philosophy, you are very likely to assume that you have a self and that the stone in your backyard is not part of it. These would seem to be the prima-facie assumptions that any human being would make, regardless of culture; for a concept of self would seem to be necessary to the structure of any language, the body belongs with the self, and the rock, having stubbed your toe, clearly comes on as an opposing force of some kind.

But what about the image of the stone that you see with your eyes closed? You assume that it belongs to you, that it is "just in your mind," and that the resemblance it bears to the "real" stone results entirely from your own act of remembering. But the grounds for this assumption are a good deal less clear than for the others. In fact, for the general human condition this is not the prima-facie assumption at all. Imagine that you are Adam and that God created you a couple of days ago. Then all this would be very new and fresh and unregulated by habitual civilized ways of thinking. You would not have our pat explanation for the images of distant things that appear willy-nilly in your mind, and would not yet, perhaps, have concluded that stones always stay in the backyard. In your state of innocence and "ignorance," wouldn't you in fact

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be struck most strongly by the resemblance of the image to the actual stone and assume that there is some very intimate connection between them? What is to stop you, even to this day and in your sophisticated civilized state, from deciding that when you see the image of the stone, the stone itself is in fact directly affecting you—sending its spirit into you, as it were, so that the image is not part of your self, but part of the stone's self?

"Stones don't have spirits—nor selves either."

You can no more prove that they don't than I can prove that they do.

"Mere primitive animism, which you read about in your mythology textbook in high school."

Maybe so. But who has tried to put himself into that world of animism to see what it was really like? That is what the American in Luzon tried to do. Such a self owns almost nothing. It is very small and helpless, like a baby. It approaches being no self at all; for every object in the consciousness is a being in its own right and has power over us in ways we can never hope wholly to understand. One is possessed by the world in every moment. There is no way to get separate from it. One has no rights. Everything must be placated, nothing molested or disturbed. Does such a picture of man's relation to his environment seem intolerable? Or does it catch something of the way things actually are—or even perhaps the way they should be? "No room for irony in a world like this," I said to myself, "I'd die"—and forgot about the matter for almost a year.

But the seed had been sown; and it kept finding strange nutrients as it grew in the darkness. We moved to an isolated farmhouse in Vermont, and I burrowed into books on Yoga and Buddhism as a refuge from America. The sixties had begun, and the air was full of strange ideas—like those of the Peckham biologists: that all life and its evolution could be looked upon as a *single* organism, as the environment organizing itself, growing, changing, decaying. We—all creatures on earth—were merely parts of this. There was no inert substance for us to work upon, as Descartes thought. We were a cell in the body of the Cosmos. The only choice for us was between rebellion, death—cancer—on the one hand, and sub-

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mission and life on the other. The old ideas of dominating and controlling were absurd. The only real power and action came through acceptance and passivity, through obeying the large forces which flowed through us. I thought how natural and common the passive voice was in ancient Greek.

And the farmhouse, which had been in the family since my childhood, was full of spirits. I sensed vaguely how much better able the Negritos would have been to cope with them than I, and that somehow seemed to plunge us, the Negritos and me, far back in my life into what must have been the most potent nutrient of all: the unreality of things.

At the end of one summer, near the beginning of time, when I was getting ready to leave home again for my second year in the Sleepy Island Academy for Boys, sitting at breakfast with my mother and thinking that there must be an algebraic equation in three unknowns whose graph in a three-dimensional coordinate system would be a doughnut—just at that moment something very unpleasant happened. Suddenly the doughnut, the coffee, the table, my mother, and the sunny dining room with its wallpaper depicting New York Harbor in the days when it was still a Dutch colony, became completely and terrifyingly unreal. Nothing "really" happened. My mother gave no sign of having noticed anything, and the conversation between us went on undisturbed—though in voices bearing no resemblance to any voices I had ever heard before and in a language that might just as well have been Swahili. I was amazed at my fluency in it.

Later that fall, as I sat in an empty classroom, working out the doughnut equation by a series of deductions of which I am still quite proud, the sensation came back. And it wasn't just the doughnut that brought it on. It happened elsewhere as well, in classes, the dining hall, on the football field. Did I realize that it had happened before the time with my mother? Or has that only occurred to me now?

I must have been five or six, and my sister had brought me to a movie in a church. The movie was about love—lots of kissing and that sort of thing—and unable to contain my boredom, I quietly slid off my chair until my feet touched the floor in the darkness. Then I left my chair completely and crawled under the chairs in the row in front of ours. In the

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dim light that filtered to the floor from the screen, I reached out and touched a pair of ankles with my soft little fingers. There was a scream. I went to the next pair and fondled them similarly. There was tumult. The lights had to be turned on, the movie stopped. My sister was in tears. I realize now that everything must have become very unreal then. That may have been the first time.

But I know that the unreality was in full force two or three years later in the summer camp. We were all at Sunday dinner, which was always a big do, when I saw what was on my neighbor's plate and liked it better than what was on mine. So I decided to eat his. There was a rush, a clatter, everyone stood up, and everything went distinctly, unquestionably unreal. . . . But I took no particular note of the fact. After all, when one goes berserk, one expects some alterations, some ripping up of roots.

In those empty classrooms on Sleepy Island it was another matter. I had heard rumors in the years before that I might not be as entirely normal as one had a right to expect from a child who had been given every benefit that the greatest civilization in the history of the world afforded, but I had discounted them as—well, surely my father and I could not be expected to agree about everything. He had a book in his bookcase, *America: Miracle at Work,* a celebration of free enterprise; and last weekend, years after his death, it was still there, reminding me that he had been a worshiper of Baal. But those sudden dissolutions of ordinary experience, those impositions of deadly dream at Sleepy Island, announced the horrifying possibility that the worst rumors might be true. I had no way of predicting the onsets nor of avoiding them. I could only wait for them.

Of course, I got used to them somewhat—those berserkings of the consciousness—and later made myths about them. During my Air Force years I fit them nicely into Yeats's supernatural system, and along with some other oddities produced for the amusement of a coven of psychiatrists, they helped me end my career as one of America's less competent jet pilots. And then at last, in that hillhouse in Vermont, the Negritos laid them to rest.

Let us look into the journal I kept and watch the little fel-

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lows at work. "Evening. This bureau, heavy with so many memories, is wood like other wood. To make contact with the present in this place is to still the past. Is it only my mother and father, or were there evil passions in this house before they came? Or is it only my own childhood that I sense?

"Edith Ducket [the wife of a friend] in our last phone conversation in Riverdale irritated me with her cosy clinical talk about the benefits of psychoanalysis. Understand yourself. Learn all about your self. Find out what you really are and get so you can accept what you really are. A clear realistic self you can live with. Thus the cat chases its tail hour after expensive hour, as the patient builds up his own personalized Pantheon, his private sacred cathedral of cause-and-effect to explain and verify something he is sure must exist. There is no self. It's an abstraction, a convention, a postulate sanctified by habit, where there is in fact nothing in any way distinct from the universe around it, which it supposedly observes, knows, meddles with. I can think of only one way to live: to feel things—feel things until this self that my language and abstract knowledge would paste on me shrivels and drops away among the absurdities. What's left? Scratch your foot, it's itching! How am I going to vanish? Drink your soup!"

A couple of years after this Edith was committed for alcoholism, released, recommitted, divorced, and lost custody of her children. No doubt her doctor shook his head sadly and said, "Poor woman, she couldn't seem to find herself." But to continue:

"Midway through the paragraph above, I sat in my armchair, and for a moment I recognized nothing. It was all me, and at the same time it was all not me, because I wasn't there any more, and yet was completely there. You can't say it with 'I' and 'me.' They'd evaporated along with the names of things there, perfectly familiar—everything simply *was*. Language and thought for a moment had left off their absurd boundary-making and thrusting apart. Bliss, very down-to-earth and ordinary, was everywhere.

"I'm tired. I haven't slept much. I suspect this experience came upon me *instead of* the sensations of unreality. Those sensations must be the underlying unity of things tapping on my weakened ego and urging it to recognize that it has no

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existence separate from the world. But my ego recoils in terror and creates the sensation that everything is unreal in its frantic attempts to maintain duality, the separation of 'me' and 'it.' So at such times I must be on the brink of making the discovery."

Then a few months later: "As I was filling my pipe in my room after dinner just now, everything went 'unreal,' and remembering a thought I had on this subject last summer gave me an idea about what was happening, what had been lost. Concepts and definitions, the awareness of what things 'were'—conceptually 'were'—had relaxed and lost their hold. Sensation was as vivid, if not more so, and my actions were as sure. Only—I was no longer aware of 'what' I was doing, 'what' I was looking at. The gray tobacco can was as vividly there and as usable, but I didn't know what it was or whether it was round or deep any more. For the first time since I have had these sensations I realized that it didn't matter—was even a relief—that I had lost this awareness, and the sensation became quite pleasant. It used to be terrifying—as if the vividness and namelessness of things were dissolving me. But how lovely it is, floating selfless, neither loving nor hating, in the flux of things, in every swirl and eddy. This is the real self—no self at all."

An objection voices itself at this point: "Look here, even if we are a doomed species, you can't dismiss 10,000 years of human progress just because you have had some nice feelings on autumn nights."

The only thing I have against progress is that it is so one-sided. In this marvelous accumulating process, things are forever being added; nothing ever seems to be taken away; or at least nothing, until recently, was ever said about it. But how are the historians to record what has been forgotten? This should present no problem. What psychoanalyst has any difficulty talking about the Unconscious Mind, which, being unconscious by definition, cannot possibly be known? Such a concept must always be a hypothesis, a myth, a way of reconciling discrepancies in our experience. History is mythical by its very nature. It is the imagined picture of a past life which explains the present experience of ancient ruins, documents,

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anomalies in our present habits, etc. Facts are never enough. If the result is to be in any way memorable, there has to be an imaginative matrix which holds the facts together in a coherent pattern and gives us the illusion that we understand the people of the past. And to be credible as people, they have to know things of which we are ignorant, do they not? Why bother to know them at all unless they can teach us something? But there is a school of thought, very powerful in Victorian times and still of considerable strength, which wants to learn nothing at all from *them*. Hence the myth—the shallowest myth of all—that in history things are being continually learned and nothing forgotten. The myth of progress. Technology is their prime example, and with any credibility at all, their only example.

I am at the border of a very large subject. Let me pay my respects to the customs official with a brief anecdote and be on my way, leaving the country of technology and the shrine of progress for later visits.

A woman who spent several months living with the hunting and gathering Bushmen of the Kalahari Desert noted in her book that there were two types of insect grub important in Bushman technology. The first was inedible and deadly and provided the poison with which the hunters tipped their arrows; the second was a rare delicacy that the Bushmen loved to eat. The two types were found in the same places, and she examined them carefully to distinguish them. She went on examining them for the three months of her stay but always had to conclude that the grubs were identical. Yet the natives could tell them apart without difficulty. It seems strange that her hosts couldn't explain to her what they noticed that escaped her, but there were doubtless linguistic difficulties involved.

One would be inclined to discount a story like this if it did not agree so well with other accounts, testifying to a sensitivity and quickness of perception possessed by hunting and gathering peoples that to the civilized observer seems uncanny. Surely this has to rate as an item of technology which has been forgotten among us. We have telescopes and microscopes, but we have paid for them, apparently, with the sharpness of our naked eyes. It isn't surprising. We live in a

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world of labels and abstractions, particularly so as we climb our social ladders and become managers, executives, experts; and lacking the nourishment from sensory perception that our underlying egoless beings require, our senses decay; and seeking their rejuvenation, we flee on weekends to the country, where, if our equipment were taken from us, we would perish in a matter of days.

But our loss since the stability of the Stone Age has not been technological; it has been of sweetness and light. This is another large subject. Much has been written about the isolated tribes around the earth which have survived into our time at this cultural level: the Bushmen, the Pigmies in the African rain forest, the Australian aborigines, the Eskimos, various tribes in the Philippines, among which the recently discovered and publicized Tasaday on Mindanao; and I can only summarize from much fascinated, casual reading. The theory that Stone Age man was violent, aggressive, and in a constant state of war over territorial rights with neighboring tribes gets no support whatever. War among tribes at this level is either completely unknown or, as with the African Pigmies, a kind of joke which results in no harm and may well be a mocking imitation of the surrounding agricultural tribes. Observer after observer has been amazed at the gentleness, gaiety, and lack of ambition of these peoples. No demon religions, no problems of social rank and rebellious behavior seem to beset these simple classless societies, which are virtually lawless because no laws are needed. One hesitates even to describe them for fear of seeming to echo nineteenth-century sentimentality about the "noble savage."

One can only conclude that the cost of our progress from the Stone Age has been great. But to gain some insight into the manner of this loss, we shall have to explain how human beings, in every way as perceptive and intelligent as we, can be so content with so little. Why aren't *they* plagued by that "noir ambition," as Racine called it, observing it in himself, that lust for conquest, that itch for grandeur? The answer has to lie in a different conception of self, and the only writer that I know to have expressed this difference in any kind of imaginative detail is the American from Luzon. Many observers have said that these people are gay and at ease because

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they are at one with their environment. But how is that possible? It is certainly not possible for me—or else I would not be writing this. But if we suppose that man's first, Stone Age assumption about images in the mind was, as the American from Luzon says, that they do not emanate from the picturing self but from the things they depict, then we can grasp immediately how such a man can be without ambition and completely at one with his environment. Quite literally his environment possesses him in every waking and sleeping moment, and it is difficult for him to imagine doing other things beyond his present occupation.

If we assume this, we can also understand why there was no progress and why life in the Old Stone Age went on substantially unchanged for at least 100,000 years. For the next great "step forward," the fundamental event which made possible the accelerating development of the human species in the last 10,000 years, was the discovery of agriculture—and the parallel event in the steppe lands of Asia, the domestication of animals. Both of these achievements would clearly have been impossible for the Stone Age mind that we have described; for both involve standing aside and taking control of the forces of nature in a new and radical way. Before the kill the hunter has no control over his quarry. Rather the opposite: to hunt successfully with the weak implements he had, he must submit himself to the ways of the animal. He imitates the animal in his dances, he draws its picture on the wall of his cave, and it comes to him in dreams. In all these events, it is the animal calling out to him, drawing him after it in a hunt that may last for days. (The purely physical aspect in which man is superior to all the other animals is his endurance: he can wear out any animal he can track.) Then finally there is the kill. The Pigmies laugh at the death throes of the animals they have wounded—a sign that they are uncomfortable about the process—but also a sign that they see the animal's death as a dance. Killing for the true hunter is an act of identification and love. (This sounds shocking to me as I write it, but I see no escape from such conclusions. According to Denis de Rougement, even war can be thought of as an act of love between one nation and another.)

Thus, in primitive hunting the identification between the

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hunter and the hunted is complete, and essentially the same observations hold for the gathering of wild vegetable food. But to plant a seed, tend its growth and harvest it clearly implies deliberate control. The image of the crop in the mind must belong to the mind, for the mind has organized the whole process. One can't practice agriculture without feeling superior to what one grows; one must be the master—though both the master and his field remain at the mercy of countless unpredictable forces. In short, the discovery of agriculture either necessitated or was made possible by a fundamental revolution of man's concept of the self.

But in the revolutionary changes since the invention of agriculture (already mentioned in my interpretation of the Adam and Eve story), there is one kind of person who, at least in certain moments, has retained the ancient self of the primitive hunter. I refer to the artists, and in particular, to the poets. I single out the poets because the other arts seem more susceptible to the changing moods of urban culture—though, of course, poetry has also been greatly influenced, particularly in the "large forms" of epic and drama. But it was the poets and not the painters and musicians whom Plato expelled from his perfect urban republic that was to be ruled by systematic philosophy. Those witty, irresponsible, charming and passionate imitators best represented that stubborn human core of whimsicality that could not be permitted in a well-ordered state. But what I have to say about them applies also to the other arts.

The poet has exactly the same relationship to his subject that the Pigmy has to his whole environment. When a poet writes a genuine poem about something, the most succinct and direct way to describe the process is to say that the subject of the poem, whatever it is, invades, haunts, and possesses the poet and insists on being written about. In the best poems, there is no poet at all, but a thing, a personality—anything at all—which occupied the poet completely and determined every aspect of the poem: its story, tone, rhythm, images—everything. I do not by any means imply that composing poetry is an irrational or thoughtless process; I only say that the poet in action has no self because that self is now completely occupied by the subject of the poem, and further, that the inception of the poem is not in the poet but is

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most accurately described by saying, The thing wanted to be written about. The animal says to the Pigmy, Hunt me! and just so, the animal on the cave wall in Lascaux appeared to a man 20,000 years ago and said, Paint me! All three of the basic arts exist at the hunting and gathering stage, are a product of that mentality, and to this day require a return to that mentality for their proper practice.

Let me illustrate with a small anecdote. The time is near the end of my first marriage. I have acquired the habit of walking around the city with index cards stuffed in a pocket in case I should see something good to write about—for I was looking for greater freshness in my poems. I saw a line of trees in front of a hospital along a street which ran westward into the sunset. Something about the scene intrigued me, so out came the cards. The lines pleased me the way they went, the new details that kept coming out of the scene as I went on. It all seemed vivid and unfamiliar in words—a good sign. When I got home, I still liked the lines, but although they were all description, it did not seem to be just a descriptive poem. The images were implying something else which wasn't there, but I had no idea what.

Around this time I seldom read my writings to my wife, for we were becoming strangers; but this once I did—and could hardly finish. Midway through, I realized that all the images had to do with the fact that our marriage was coming to an end, which I had not yet admitted very clearly to myself, let alone to her, though she sensed it. But I had to finish reading. If I broke off, it would be worse—even more painfully obvious. Did she know? Did the bare images say to her what they said to me? It wasn't the sort of thing I could have asked about. But in any case, I knew how to finish the poem.

At this point my friend, the psychoanalyst, will say to me in gentle, indulgent tones that those trees didn't speak to me at all and that all these events can be given a perfectly rational explanation in terms of my dualistic self. Subconsciously I knew that my relationship with my first wife had become impossible. Then when I saw the trees, street, and sun, I projected this unconscious awareness into them, and that is why they interested me. Then when I read the lines to my wife, I realized the game I had been playing on myself. . . .

Fine, fine, yes, I understand. But there's only one problem.

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That's not what happened. That's not what I experienced. Like good scientists, don't we have to choose the simplest hypothesis that will account for the observations? (For science is also governed by principles of esthetics.) In your explanation I have to say, "I projected my thoughts onto the trees, even though I was totally unaware of the fact, and was actually experiencing the trees, as with wills of their own, drawing my interest to them." That's getting pretty complicated, and I rejoin with triumphant simplicity: "The trees spoke to me."

But there is a better way for us to decide which of us has the better explanation. We can ask the poem. To do this properly, we have to be wide and strong readers of poems in English, so that we know good ones from poor ones. Then the answer is simple. If it is a good poem, there is something magical about it, the scene actually speaks in a moving and awesome way, and I am right about what happened; and if it is a poor poem with no compelling relation between the scene and the realization, so that the reader suspects that the poet is only playing some kind of psychological game with himself, then the analyst is quite correct.

But what if a poet writes a good poem, a powerful and magical poem, and then accepts the analyst's explanation of its inception? Why then, with the dualistic self he must acquire in order to agree with the analyst, he is deluding himself about the nature of his art. For the nature of his art is not analytical, but magical, and his poem belies his explanation of it. Poets like the rest of us have to live in a civilization founded on a dualistic self, so it is very likely, when they discuss their poems in the manner of conventional civilized discourse, that they will find it convenient to ignore or deny the poem's origin in primitive selflessness.

"This is all mere assertion. Even among the poets, who would agree with you?"

Will Keats do? There is that famous passage from one of his letters: "Several things dove-tailed in my mind, and at once it struck me what quality went to form a Man of Achievement, especially in Literature, and which Shakespeare possessed so enormously—I mean *Negative Capability*, that is, when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason—

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Coleridge, for instance, would let go by a fine isolated verisimilitude caught from the Penetralium of mystery, from being incapable of remaining content with half-knowledge. This pursued through volumes would perhaps take us no further than this, that with a great poet the sense of Beauty overcomes every other consideration, or rather obliterates all consideration."

This can be interpreted many ways, but in the terms we are using, it means that the poet must renounce the demand (of the independent self) for "fact and reason," that is, for conventional order. This amounts to saying that the poet must renounce his independent self; and that is why Keats calls his capacity to do this Negative Capability. Shakespeare is the best instance because it is so utterly impossible to locate Shakespeare, the man, in his plays or even in his "personal" poems. We have characters acting and talking, and what they say is always very interesting, provocative, and sometimes even philosophical; but it is always *their* ideas, never *his*. The more Shakespeare we read, the more we realize this; for there is no consistent view. One character contradicts another, and there is never any attempt to resolve the differences in a philosophical way. One even finds whole plays contradicting one another: it's hard to imagine, for example, how the gloom, disgust, and haunting sense of sin in *Othello* and the gay relish for life and sex in *Anthony and Cleopatra* could have been products of the same mind. Only the style assures us that the same man authored both. The only possible resolution is that Shakespeare, when he wrote plays, became selfless, so that these two sets of characters and actions could possess him and reach their own form unimpeded by what he himself willed or thought.

"No, Keats will not do. Keats was a Romantic. Naturally you would be able to find passages of his that endorse your own absurdly romantic theory of art. What endorsement can you find from the neoclassic artists who felt that art must adhere to rules and be made by the conscious calculating self?"

How about Pope, then—our quintessence of English neoclassicism? Keats detested him and his works. That ought to be credential enough. Keats liked to thumb his nose at Pope, praising Chapman's Homer at a time when Pope's was virtu-

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ally the official translation, and even rewriting him from time to time. To Pope's couplet,

> True ease in writing comes from art, not chance;
> As those move easiest who have learned to dance.

Keats replies,

> When I behold, upon the night's starr'd face,
> Huge cloudy symbols of a high romance,
> And think that I may never live to trace
> Their shadows, with the magic hand of chance . . .

Pope's word "art" in his day meant "conscious intention." Learning your trade, in poetry as in other things, is what matters, he seems to be saying. It's not luck or chance or anything mysterious like that. Nonsense! Keats retorts. Chance is exactly what it is, and it's magical too.

But Pope isn't talking about poetic inspiration, only "ease in writing." A poet, he says, must master the techniques of his art. There is plenty of room for inspiration in this view. A poet, in developing technique, is like the worshiper laboriously purifying himself, making himself a fit vehicle for the spirit when it chooses to come. And when the spirit does come, technique is forgotten because it has become innate. The second line of Pope's couplet makes this clear. The person who is graceful in his movements because he has learned to dance isn't remembering his dancing lessons when he walks: the lessons have become part of him.

Any doubts about Pope's meaning are dispelled by earlier lines in the same poem ("An Essay on Criticism"). In writing poetry, he says, "there's a happiness as well as care"—or as we would say, there's luck as well as diligence.

> Music resembles Poetry, in each
> Are nameless graces which no methods teach,
> And which a master hand alone can reach.
> . . . .
> Thus Pegasus a nearer way may take,
> May boldly deviate from the common track,

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From vulgar bounds with brave disorder part,
And snatch a grace beyond the reach of art.

Note that it isn't the poet who takes the "nearer way," but Pegasus, the flying horse, meaning the poem itself with its own will and brute force, taking its own path in the selfless poet.

Even Aristotle, that ancient grandfather of cold classical analysis, agrees: "The poet should work out his play, to the best of his power, with appropriate gestures." In other words, the poet must stop being himself and become the character he portrays. Surely that "power" the poet needs in order to do this is Keats's negative capability. "Hence poetry implies either a happy gift of nature or a strain of madness. In the one case a man can take the mould of any character; in the other, he is lifted out of his proper self." Note that the alternative is not whether the poet while composing does or doesn't cease to be his "proper self"—that is, his civilized dualistic self—but whether he does so willingly and thoughtfully or passively in a state of possession.

Two observations are in order at this point. First: "So you have made it seem likely that poets and other artists are survivals of that primitive selflessness in which, you say, humanity lived in happy stability for 100,000 years. What does that do for the rest of us, caught in the dilemmas of civilization? Even the poets, as you describe them, have ceased to exist; for the poets nowadays are a sorry lot, as caught up in empty fads as the silliest TV producer."

The second in some measure answers the first: "What you describe about the nature of poetry is so thoroughly ordinary that I wonder why you have gone to the trouble. Every one of us, insofar as we have any life in us at all, are inspired in this way throughout our years. Day after day we discover things: in a flash we see a way to do something, how the peg will fit into the hole, what the answer is to the problem; we find something we have lost; we become suddenly aware of someone or something we love or hate; and in all those discoveries, those inspirations, we lose our sense of self and, simply because we have become intensely aware of something other than ourselves, have become selfless."

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Precisely. As Gerard Manley Hopkins said, poets when they are inspired write poems, and other people when they are inspired do other things. But you perhaps see the process more clearly in the poets. Other activities—though this is also true of poetry—are continually getting mixed up with civilized self-aggrandizements. The composer needs a symphony orchestra, press agents, a civic establishment, to do his work. The mechanic needs an elaborate shop. Housewives need washing machines and electronic ovens. All a poet needs are a few odd bits of paper, an old pencil stub, and perhaps a pair of good walking shoes. And the process that he represents, the survival of the selflessness—the childishness, if you will—of the Stone Age, is crucial to the survival of us all. The idea is a little strange to us, whose imaginations are enmeshed so inextricably with the things we can manufacture, sell, and own; but the Chinese have had it for a long time, this deep respect for the primitive, childlike response to things which underlies all our civilized systems. So let me conclude with a bit from one of their old books:

"Chuang Tzu and Hui Tzu were strolling one day on the bridge over the river Hao. Chuang Tzu said, 'Look how the minnows dart hither and thither where they will. Such is the pleasure that fish enjoy.' Hui Tzu said, 'You are not a fish. How do you know what gives pleasure to fish?' Chuang Tzu said, 'You are not I. How do you know that I do not know what gives pleasure to fish?' Hui Tzu said, 'If because I am not you, I cannot know whether you know, then equally because you are not a fish, you cannot know what gives pleasure to fish. My argument still holds." Chuang Tzu said, 'Let us go back to where we started. You asked me how I know what gives pleasure to fish. But you already knew how I knew when you asked me. You knew that I knew it by standing here on the bridge at Hao.' "

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HARVEY SHAPIRO

At the Shore

1. If my head is numb,
my heart, my genitals also,
I can guard my wallet
confidently in the subway
like a citizen.

2. When the face that was beautiful
turns ugly in argument—
you always—
then it is I see that death will come
leaving me as ignorant as ever.

3. The bugs batting against the lamp, the midges,
in an old house, in summer,
the peacefulness after voices are stilled
is like the still small voice we were
told to tune in to as children.

4. If you could figure it out,
the domestic arrangements you fall into,
like beds or a summer at the shore.
You wake up facing a meadow,
beyond that water, beyond that an island.
On the other side of the island
you begin another life.

5. The big dipper is outside my door,
so I can find my way north,
if that is the way I need to go.
For the moment I am content
to drink and smoke and stroke
the inside of your thighs
that have taken on the smoothness
of beach glass, glazed by the sea,
a remembrance.

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6. The man who has no talent for relationships
listens to the wind. It comes sweeping off
the harbor and the bay into the blue room.
He thinks he can recognize
every tune it plays. What
he wants is merciless music, the sound
at the very bottom of the harbor.

7. The chink of the moth
on my glass, the dog's
heavy breathing as if
some race were being run again,
and my own solitary presence
at my desk are all emblems
for me of the night world.
In the next room
you sprawl in sleep
so that my day can begin again.

8. Night after night
the wind is from the south,
off Shelter Island, wisps
of lightning play about the sky.
Orienting myself by that speaking wind,
I rise, troubled in lamplight,
to say once again that my
dreams are pernicious
and blur the clarity of what I see—
mute swans, cormorants, the rushes.
This self, this consciousness, this pressure cooker
for rhetoric and bad vibes
that I lug to the country.
It is my usual hour—3 AM.
When I was younger and had the gift of sight
I did not understand that all that is asked
is that we not mar the work of creation,
doing injury to others and ourselves.

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LOUIS SIMPSON

Realists

JULY 23, 1980

Have finished *He Knew He Was Right* and begun *The Claverings* . . .

When one considers the novel, its special province, "life," Trollope is unbeatable. He has a broad knowledge of men and manners. Other novelists have this—Trollope's peculiar strength is his moderation.

Consider Captain Boodle's conversation with Archie in which he advises him how to go about wooing Lady Ongar. The advice is proffered in terms having to do with horses, Captain Boodle's trade: "When I've got to do with a trained mare, I always choose that she shall know that I'm there." Think what Dickens might have made of Captain Boodle! But Trollope is content to tickle our funnybone and get on with the story.

In the *Autobiography* he tells how, before beginning each day's work, he read some pages from the day before. In this way he maintained an even tone, like the rising of the sun every day.

Trollope is not Zola: blood is not shed in front of us, but lives are at stake all the same. The scene in which Harry Clavering confesses to Cecelia Burton that he has been seeing Julia Ongar, and being "false" to Cecelia's sister, is painful . . . so painful that, like Harry, we wish it were over. Harry forfeits the affection Cecelia has had for him up to now. In her eyes he sees himself clearly for the first time: he is not a fine fellow, but very ordinary. This is all, yet it is everything—in a sense Harry dies.

In *The Claverings* Trollope is writing about a young man who has no character, as does Flaubert in *L'Education Sentimentale*. I'm not sure but that Trollope does a better job.

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July 27

Well, *The Claverings* fell apart, and it's clear why Trollope isn't ranked with the great novelists. From the moment that Harry Clavering decides to break with Julia Ongar and go back to his insipid fiancée, not because he wants to but because it is the conventionally "right" thing to do, we cease to care one way or the other. Yet Trollope goes on turning out his eight pages a day, tying up loose ends. As though it mattered!

In his autobiography Trollope attributes the comparative failure of this novel to the "weakness" of Harry Clavering, by which he seems to mean moral weakness. But the weakness of a fictional character can be interesting, even attractive. The reason for the failure of the novel is Trollope's weakness as an artist. This writer who was capable of laboring like a navvy, turning out so many pages every day, even on board ship, was also capable of avoiding a serious treatment of the subject.

To understand Harry Clavering, one would have to share his life . . . even at the risk of tedium, as Flaubert shares the life of Frédéric Moreau. That is taking the thing one has created seriously . . . the life of imagination can take you into some dreary places.

But this is at the risk of putting off your reader. It is a risk Trollope is not willing to take. So he washes his hands of Harry Clavering and lets Victorian morality dictate the rest of the novel. In the light of that morality Harry is a "weakling"—the author has abandoned his task and taken a seat in the audience. "Look at what an ass Harry Clavering is making of himself, like the ass between two bundles of hay."

This reminds me of the inconsistency in *He Knew He Was Right.* At the outset Trollope makes Emily Trevelyan obstinate, even perverse, in refusing to accede to her husband's wish and continuing to receive the visits of Colonel Osborne. It is clear that she is engaged in a struggle with her husband for power. At the end of the novel, however, it appears that the fault is all on his side, and she is the loyal wife who has been unjustly accused—a figure in a painting by Augustus Egg.

In spite of his knowledge of men and women, Trollope is willing to settle for a conventional view. The perverseness of

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Emily Trevelyan is sacrificed to the cliché of the dutiful, long-suffering wife. Harry Clavering does not go to bed with Julia Ongar—instead he goes back to his fiancée. Then he comes into an inheritance, an ending with which no one can quarrel . . . the *deux ex machina* of the Victorian novel.

The truth about Trollope is that he was lazy—a more serious writer would have written less. As F. R. Leavis said, the novels do not say anything to justify their length; they merely serve to kill time, "which seems to be all that even some academic critics demand of a novel."

August

The same female protagonist, at different stages in her life, appears in Jean Rhys's novels, *Quartet, After Leaving Mr Mackenzie, Voyage in the Dark,* and *Good Morning, Midnight.* She also appears in the short stories.

We can give her a composite history by rearranging the episodes. As she has several names, for the sake of consistency let us call her X.

She grows up on an island in the West Indies, before the Great War. Her father is an Englishman—her mother, West Indian.

Her mother dies and her father marries again. The stepmother is English, the worst sort of colonizing type—she despises the natives. When X's father dies, her stepmother sends her to England to finish her schooling, then swindles her out of her inheritance.

X finds work in the chorus of a road show that plays in the provinces. She becomes familiar with dreary streets and rooms. She takes a lover and loses her virginity. The lover abandons her. X is pregnant and has to have an abortion. The lover pays for this.

X has other relationships with men. At some point in this composite history one of the men settles an amount of money upon her, to be paid regularly through a lawyer. Then the payments stop.

X is in Paris, working as a fashion model. Then it is after the war, and she is married to a Dutchman who engages in shady speculations. X acquires a fur coat that represents a certain kind of success. Then her husband is wanted by the

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police, and suddenly X is poor. She has a child that dies because she can't afford to have it taken care of properly.

By the time she is thirty X has begun to deteriorate. She drinks too much. She isn't too proud to accept money from men who are practically strangers. She has been evicted from hotels. She is no longer young.

There is no sentimentality in Jean Rhys's perception of X. On the contrary, at moments she treats her with a kind of gallows humor. When things are as bad as they could be, X is sure to do something to make them worse.

The key to X's character and fate is in the following passage between her and her stepmother.

> "I hate dogs," I said.
> "Well, really!" she said.
> "Well, I do," I said.
> "I don't know what'll become of you if you go on like that," Hester said. "Let me tell you that you'll have a very unhappy life if you go on like that. People won't like you. People in England will dislike you very much if you say things like that."

X will not have a happy life, because she speaks her mind—it is as simple as that.

This reckless and admirable trait makes her an outsider. Respectable people dislike her instinctively and look for ways to humiliate her and beat her down.

They don't dislike her because she is a woman or because she is poor (Jean Rhys doesn't fall into the category of a feminist or a social reformer). They dislike X and seek to humiliate her because she speaks her mind and looks it, refusing to "knuckle under." As she is a woman alone, and has no money, they are able to treat her badly and get away with it.

In a confrontation with her sister who has done the "right thing" all her life, X says, "All the people who've knuckled under—you're jealous. D'you think I don't know? You're jealous of me, jealous, jealous. Eaten up with it."

She is right—they envy her freedom of spirit. And they will punish her continually for having it.

Jean Rhys drew on her life for this fiction—her autobiography makes this clear. But she is not sentimental; she stands away from X and lets you see her weaknesses. So we can be-

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lieve her when she shows the others to be contemptible. The motif, man's inhumanity to man, that rises from this fiction rings true.

If instead of writing novels and short stories at intervals, Jean Rhys had written one big, continuous novel, she might be far better known. As it is, we have only these few short novels and short stories. As Ingres once remarked, "With talent, you do what you like. With genius, you do what you can."

August 25

Many years ago, having read *César Birotteau* and *Cousin Pons*, I decided I'd had enough of Balzac—it had been a painful experience. Now, with *Lost Illusions*, I am again puzzled by the pleasure he takes in showing the triumph of the strong over the weak.

Balzac is the novelist *par excellence*. If you had to choose one novelist to represent the genus, the energy a novelist needs to have, the curiosity about human behavior, the inventiveness, it would be Balzac. He was everything that the public believes an artist to be: romantic, extravagant, obsessed. Because he believed it himself.

Balzac is inexhaustibly creative. This one novel is a world in itself, full of living characters: Lucien Rubempré, the poet who longs to be admired and who betrays everyone; who becomes remorseful and, at the first breath of fame, recovers . . . Mme. de Bargeton, the romantic woman at thirty-six, sensitive, proud, verging on the ridiculous . . . Séchard, the old miser who is also a drunkard—masterly touch!—and who is willing to ruin his own son . . . Séchard is as comical a miser as Harpagon. In any other literature do misers loom so large?

The picture of manners among the provincial aristocracy seems to have been done from the inside. And Balzac's knowledge of the paper-manufacturing business is staggering—in fact, he knows too much. A young man, having proposed marriage to the woman he loves, and been accepted, sits with her in the moonlight and delivers a lecture on papermaking. "Labor is very cheap in China, where a workman earns three halfpence a day, and this cheapness enables the Chinese to manipulate each sheet of paper separately." Et cet-

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era. This may very well be the most ridiculous love scene in literature.

This kind of extravagance, however, comes of superabundant energy—other novelists are not capable of rising to Balzac's faults. He cannot help plunging into the details of business and legal proceedings. When one of his characters draws up an "account of expenses," Balzac gives it to you, item by item. He invests facts with a vitality they have in no other novelist. In a novel by Balzac a debt of 6000 francs is alive—it breathes, pursues its prey, and pounces.

In his passion for facts Balzac may, indeed, be closer to the urgent concerns of the nineteenth century than the innumerable novelists who wrote about love. He is the best historian of the rise of the bourgeoisie, and for this he has been praised by the Communists, from Lenin to Lukacs.

I concede that Balzac is writing history. Still, he strikes me as a kind of monster. To render the cruelties of life as energetically as Balzac does, and in such detail, is to take pleasure in them. He admires his human tigers of the counting house and Bourse.

A footnote . . . Henry James on Balzac. Speaking of Balzac's ambition, or compulsion, to write about everything, James says, "It amounts to a sort of suffered doom, since to be solicited by the world from all quarters at once, what is that for the spirit but a denial of escape? We feel his doom to be want of a private door, and that he felt it, though more obscurely, himself."

This is a profound observation. But then, so many of us have a "private door," and so few can create like Balzac.

August 28

His name was Benito Pérez Galdós. He was very famous in Spain before the Great War—his play, *Electra*, was a rallying point for liberals. His historical novels were read by everyone; his realistic fiction met with some resistance but came to be regarded highly. There was agitation to obtain the Nobel prize for Galdós—committees were formed, et cetera—but he didn't get it. He died in 1920.

And I had never heard of Galdós. There's no doubt that reputations in the arts follow the flag, and Spain is no longer

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a great empire. On the other hand, when I was growing up in the British West Indies we read Robert Louis Stevenson. There were hundreds of English classics, some French . . . and none in German, Spanish or Italian. I am exaggerating slightly—one had heard of *Don Quixote*.

As for the Russians . . . I suppose that one of the young men who were imported from Oxford and Cambridge to teach us might have heard of Tolstoy or Dostoievsky, but if so he never passed on the word.

Now here is Galdós, and he can bear comparison with the novelists of England and France and Russia. I have only read *Miau*, his novel about an old civil servant who is out of work and seeking re-employment . . . but how many books does one have to read before one decides that a writer is "great"? One great book is enough to settle a man's claim, in my opinion.

Galdós has the quality all great novelists share—he is interested in everyone. A character has only to appear for a minute, and he's alive. There are no supernumerary characters—everyone has a life, and it's important. *Miau* gives off what Henry James described as "that vague hum, that indefinable echo of the whole multitudinous life of man, which is the real sign of a great work of fiction."

The novel centers on two people: the old man, Villaamil, who grows wilder and wilder as other, less deserving men are given positions or receive promotions while he, with all his years of loyal, honest service to the State, and his brilliant plan for instituting an income tax, is left out in the cold; and his grandchild, Luis, who is in the way of becoming a saint. Luis has visions of God and converses with him. It is very difficult to get his grandfather a job, God tells Luis. He tells people what to do, but they don't listen.

And if Luis doesn't do his homework, how can his grandfather find a position? Luis hasn't been studying; in his geography lesson he misplaced a town and a river. What's the use of making a world, if people are going to throw things around?

Besides Luis there are a family of "Miaus," his grandmother and his aunts, who have been given this nickname because they look like cats. There is Luis' father, who is wicked for the love of it. And a wonderful dog named Canelo.

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The visions of Luis are not dreams or hallucinations—Galdós makes this quite clear, though you'd have to read the novel to see how. The realism of Galdós is "psychological"—everything is related to the workings of the minds of his characters, not conjured out of thin air. The God whom little Luis sees is as believable as the human characters, because Luis sees him.

By the end of the story the demarcation between "real life" and the life of ideas has vanished. Galdós shows that practically anything can be accomplished within the mode of realism—you can be as imaginative as you like, as well as "true to life."

Critics like to say that the term "realism" has no meaning. For what is the "real"? It is what you think—"thinking makes it so." They prefer to discuss realism as a literary movement, the leader of which was Champfleury, who may have been a realist but was certainly trivial.

But though you may not be able to define a thing exactly, it may exist nonetheless. Realism is a definite way of looking at things, and a way of writing, recognizably different from other kinds.

The realist aims to create an illusion of life. Fantastic images, supernatural events, and dogmatic ideas have no place in such writing unless they are presented as happening in the minds of the characters.

The realist attempts at all times to present a picture of life that is recognizably true.

Of course one can think of anything and assert it is true, but this is not useful. Truth is that which is true to our experience. In the words of William James, "True ideas are those that we can assimilate, validate, corroborate and verify. False ideas are those we can not . . .

"The truth of an idea is not a stagnant property inherent in it. Truth *happens* to an idea. It *becomes* true, is *made* true by events . . .

". . . truth [is] something essentially bound up with the way in which one moment in our experience may lead us towards other moments which it will be worth while to have been led to."

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FREDERICK MORGAN

Five Dream Poems

for Rosemary Felton

The Demonstration

It seemed to be a monk, plausibly disguised
in the tried-and-true attitude of the Dying Gladiator,
who was seeking to propound to me some "ultimate"
question . . .

But while I watched, the scene changed again
in this cosmologic handsome picture-show
to a plain country kitchen where a woman's hands
were shaping white flour into pillows of bread
as a mouse walked tip-toe on the faded ceiling.

It cannot be, then, the lie you lie expecting
as a foot-bridge of remarkable length from hell
that becomes the subject of the demonstration

these days (these nights): no, not by any means,
you cannot play dead in the unspeakable limbo
(spiritual tremors marking out the soul's passage)—

I am not dead but have lain down to rest
in my silent sleepy bunk-room along about twilight:
the outer wall is eight foot thick,
and down on the beach white sand has drifted
negligently into elegant dunes,

and I work a slick witchcraft that joins to beauty
as we suddenly set sail on the antarctic sea
(it is plenty light enough) where the wind sends curling
little pallid waves like lazy whips
while at daybreak a curlew screams out my living word!

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I'll not come back—do not wait upon the shore,
kind frivolous women from time's abyss,
do not yield to expectations of what nature may demand

but remember to the last those berries that bloom
purple and russet in your hinterland shades
with the thrush that speaks at nightfall, and
the wild Sileni in their caves beneath the mountains.

Visitor

The visitor looked across the bright pond
where goldfish floated, belly up—
a young man, long and strangely lean
in this world of the shades of shadows.

Behind the great house the sun munched dust
while the children kept busy with their growling and
playing—
perfect circles, of such nicety—
in that precinct of dire retrievals.

Would the feasts be infrequent, and of infinite bliss?
Such an idea had all along existed
among noble deities and earthbound demons
as body dragged soul down, down into the mutable.

This dream would reveal no particular person
or place, the garden in which he reclined
being exiled, it seemed, from what purposeful roads
and crossing-places had been found exemplary—

yet "every nature with which heaven will be filled"
had unshrouded itself to that setting sun . . .
Softly in the dusk a woman was singing.
A light wind kept waking him, as if into battle.

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The Reflection

Among night-time tribes, in the night-time forest,
accusations of witchcraft are leveled against the women:
on the tenth night they learn to turn to jaguars and bats
and are harried to the sky where they enjoy celestial
visions.

Out of my six wits with anxiety and grief
for the wanderer lost on my backward shore
I was recognized at once in Schadenland
by one who reached a paw out to pluck my shirt.
He led me to the central hut within a muddy clearing.

A skeleton dangled from the roof's overhang
who began to creak and clatter at my reticent approach.
It seemed he was distempered by the course of these
events!
A huff of jungle night-breath proved his sudden
ruination . . .

I knocked at the hut door. My companion changing shape
was a gravid insect-thing who bumped the ground
and whimpered—
a kind, I thought, to fill my ears at night with slippery eggs
that would crack and leak their venom . . . Turning
on the seductress
I spurned her frothy mandibles as the door inched gravely
open.

Inside, in firelight, a huge black king
was carving men and women, most delicately, of wood.
They sprang to life unmindful of a ghost's imploring gaze
(it was Rimbaud's played-out doubleganger, dismal and
disheveled,
assuming kill-joy attitudes behind the black left shoulder)

and walked out past me silently. A shadow sun was sinking
as I strained to see those faces: men, women, a few
children—

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persons I had known once on the day-shores of ocean—
moving to the darkening wood, comprehending nothing.

—Clothe me in jaguar skin, give me secret wings
to ride the difficult air of this sardonic vision
that enunciates a night-sky to a million aching tribes—
but do not ask me, like a luckier man, to propound:

for I reckon from what radiance my revenant has come
(as between eons of night, they say, flash ribbings of
perception)
and how it will outlinger every timely shift of shape . . .
Let the dark knowers range at large through moonless
hemispheres
and chessmen wander blindly, ignorant of their squares!

Everything that breathes in the origin, is the origin.

At the Hidden Springs

The water-sounds flowed on reflexive
suggesting a new brief happiness
for the one who burned insane with rage
buffeted in darkness by living men.

The alternative, of course, was non-existence:
and what a grim gap he'd leave behind
thanks to that fabled strength of will—

huge cities leveled to the ground,
fists crashing down into misshapen faces!

I shut the doors of my mind to it all

and laying my hand across his mouth
told him I wished I could forget

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(as though one might fall asleep at last
finding such difficulties of little substance)
this time of filth and treachery . . .

Then we moved through a world of flowers and books,
the rage being overcome, as it seemed,
and he put on the wreaths of a pagan god
and blessed the past from which he had foundered.

The Diagrams

The large rains had long since passed in thunder
when I became the subject of a threatening monument
in the old park, by the ocean's edge.

Dismal Sundays! In deliberate stages,
like a pharaoh advancing through the Underkingdom,
I evaded the snares of those excellent sermons

delivered by a mock-man with glittering teeth:
a mother, it seemed, had lost ten sons in battle
and even in dreams breathed their acrid scent.

This was a marvel. But all the while I thought
of you, Clarissima, eyes vivid as moons,
who hold in your depths a thousand melodies

which the fairest landscape may never accommodate:
has the Prince not stared through his diamond lens
all autumn, believing you incapable of folly?

Weighed down by winter now, the ponds are dozing
while five guileful lunatics (impersonating angels)
in worn leather jackets saunter beneath the smoke

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of decadent December . . . It's the last fastening
(not that any amount of luck will accomplish it),
the last fascination . . . And farther down the coast

ten thousand wild geese fly in from the north
to the philosopher's cove, and ice begins to gleam
on flashy rivulets, and bacon fries in cottages,

and the women expose their cunts in the cement factory
to idle come-and-goers, to angels with blond wings,
though all afternoon one body is not present . . .

The Image may divide, then, into ghost and lasting bronze,
in different centuries walking the same forest
to the ocean's margin, where an old park awaits—

but I, expectant of the dusk, outlinger these charades
in the moon-eyed progenitrix's hazardous kitchen
(among lightnings elusively aflicker after rain)

and watch a milky she-cat chew the old Book's random
pages
as I offer at the hearthside of devious time
these diagrams, homes of the dead.

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MARVIN MUDRICK

Truth, Justice, and Other Spice for the Immature

In his youth Voltaire got a word of advice: "No matter what you write, you will never succeed in destroying the Christian religion." "We'll see about that," he replied. This anecdote pops up very early (without attribution, and I haven't seen it elsewhere, but I hope it's true) in Wayne Andrews' little book,[1] which—braced by "thankful" acknowledgments to "the Reverend Julien Gunn of Nashville, and the Reverend Richard W. Ingalls of Detroit"—isn't a life and times at all but rather a trial by foregone conclusion, a kangaroo court, the Enlightenment in the dock, the joker decked, the great debunker debunked. Andrews is undoubtedly vexed with the whole damned eighteenth century, but he's so unaccustomed to public thinking that it's sometimes hard to tell just when he's foaming at the mouth and when he's just brushing his teeth. "Diderot was an atheist," he says for no other apparent reason than to add mysteriously: "Since atheists come in all sizes, the point must be made that he was never a desperate poet on the order of Nietzsche." (Christians, zero; Lions, zero.) Presumably Christians *don't* come in all sizes; nor ought they to come in thirty varieties either, if only because that's how Voltaire preferred them: Voltaire liked England better than France because in England there were "thirty different varieties [of Christians] and the result was the English lived in peace with each other." Sounds like a pretty good reason for a preference; but Andrews adds: "That this peace might be due to indifference or even apathy did not concern Voltaire"—as it concerns Andrews, who seems on the verge of confiding that he himself prefers the St. Bartholomew's Day Massacre and the Thirty Years' War. Peace is for atheists. Logic is for atheists; if a one-hundred-per-cent believer wants

[1] VOLTAIRE, by *Wayne Andrews*. New Directions. $13.95.

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to prove something he simply assumes it and starts throwing dead cats in all directions to make a stink:

> Although Voltaire never said this in so many words [or by implication, or by the zaniest extrapolation from anything he can be shown from his life and works to have thought and felt], it is obvious that what most displeased him in Christianity was—as he conceived it—its emphasis on sentiment. An awkward, even dangerous preoccupation, sentiment should be banished from civilization. Yet his legal instinct told him it might be useful in winning a case in court. So he turned sentimental when he argued in favor of the Calas and Sirven families and the hapless La Barre and his confederates.

Somewhere among these convulsive fabrications and nonsequiturs is somebody who intends to be witty: gallows humor with rack-and-pinion sneering, and what could be more appropriate? because the people Andrews is having his fun with are men who were tortured to death on phony charges as well as the man who did his best to save them or at least their families and their honor. For example the "hapless" Chevalier de La Barre was a nineteen-year-old nobleman who failed to take off his hat while a religious procession was passing, also owned suspect books (including Voltaire's *Philosophical Dictionary*; but according to Andrews his reading was "mainly confined to novels like *La Religieuse en Chemise*, *Le Portier de Chartreux*, and other spice for the immature"), in consequence of which after due process he had his legs broken under torture, his head chopped off, and his body incinerated (he "seems to have been a flippant creature," says Andrews, "perhaps as great a bigot as the bigoted Roman Catholics who cheered his execution": in Nashville or Detroit the spectators wouldn't have cheered). The Calas case, which Andrews regards as one more of the multitudinous self-serving and trivial diversions of Voltaire's self-serving and trivial life, is the most celebrated instance in history of a private citizen's pursuit of justice in behalf of total strangers, an instance besides in which Voltaire virtually created public opinion in the act of appealing to it as a lever against the rock of sanctioned injustice. The Calas father had been tortured to death, a son exiled, the mother and daughters committed to a convent, because being Huguenots in a Catholic country they could be convicted by gossip and rumor alone of murdering another

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son who had in fact hanged himself (it was alleged that they had killed him for fear he was about to turn Catholic). Voltaire spent three years applying his attention, ascertained the facts, wrote a pamphlet on the case and many letters to officials and influential persons as far as the King's mistress and the King, wrote the *Treatise on Toleration*, consoled and assisted the family, till at last the survivors were rehabilitated and awarded a large indemnity by the Royal Council. "There was no doubt," says Andrews, laughing like a loon, "about Voltaire's diligence in collecting the facts [for his pamphlet]. Even the Roquefort cheese that the family friend, Gobert Lavaisse, went out to buy on the evening of the crime [what crime? the young man's suicide?] is duly mentioned." Then there was Voltaire's self-serving and trivial involvement with the Sirvens, another Huguenot family he rescued, this time after not three but six years of his usual cataract of letters, documents, solicitations—a case at the successful termination of which, in 1771, he was seventy-seven years old. "Possibly Voltaire was overworked," chortles Andrews, "on the day he simplified the history of Christianity for the benefit of a Swiss Huguenot. 'There is,' he wrote, 'an abominable monster abroad who brought about the unhappiness of the Calases and the Sirvens after having spread its poisons in the world for more than sixteen hundred years. . . .' " The fiery old man who can't forgive the godawful Christians won't be forgiven by the godawful Christians, who nevertheless ought to ponder what mad William Blake was heard to say fifty years after Voltaire's death: "I have had much intercourse with Voltaire, and he said to me: 'I blasphemed the Son of Man, and it shall be forgiven me; but they blasphemed the Holy Ghost in me, and it shall not be forgiven them.' "

Voltaire's most persistent day-after-day campaign against the abominable monster had to do with serfdom in France generally, and more specifically with a chapter of twenty monks at Saint-Claude who kept twelve hundred peasants in a state of subjection that amounted to slavery. As Theodore Besterman sums it up:

> Most of the peasants of France still lived in a state of feudal servitude, subject to lay as well as ecclesiastic tithes and innumerable taxes, obliged to sacrifice much of their time to road-building and other *corvées*. Voltaire had already pointed out these grievances in

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> his eloquent *Requête à tous les magistrats du royaume* (1770), and he now discovered that a community of monks in his own province, at Saint-Claude, used their feudal rights to such a point that their peasants were little more than slaves. They had even enforced the *jus primae noctis*, and confiscated the goods of a bride's father because she had slept with her husband on the night of their marriage. This inflamed Voltaire's indignation to such an extent that he launched a whole fleet of memoranda and petitions against the ferocious monks. These were not without effect, and some of the worst abuses were eventually remedied; but the real reform had to wait for the revolution.[2]

It wasn't till the year after Voltaire's death (in 1778, at the age of eighty-three) that Louis XVI abolished serfdom throughout France, though "the ferocious monks" of Saint-Claude refused to comply fully till another decade had passed and the Revolution flushed them away for good.

"These were the years," says Andrews of Voltaire's seventies and eighties, "in which Voltaire turned businessman, promoting the sales all over Europe of watches and stockings produced by his neighbors." Andrews is alluding to Voltaire's conversion of his estate at Ferney, just inside France at the Swiss border, from the country house of an impoverished and almost depopulated district into the headquarters of the most flourishing province in France, welcoming refugees political and religious, building houses (and a church!) for them, introducing agricultural improvements, developing industries, making Ferney a watchmaking center to rival Geneva, doing it all with his own energies and out of his own pocket from his first days there. "I am buying the estate of Ferney only to do a little good," he remarked in a letter; and (according to Besterman)

> Before the ink was dry on the contract [for the purchase of the estate] Voltaire set about repairing the road from Geneva to Pregny; wrote the first of the innumerable letters, petitions, memoranda which eventually led to the abolition of the feudal dues attached to the estate; applied to the Dijon *parlement* on behalf of the commune against the oppressive priest of Ferney; employed twenty men to restore the vineyards; asked for drawings of a new kind of wine-press; acquired a sowing-machine with six drills; and prepared to set up a stud-farm. All this was merely an

[2] VOLTAIRE, by *Theodore Besterman*. University of Chicago Press. 3rd ed. $25.00.

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> intimation of twenty years of incessant labour which eventually transformed a wretched serflike population into a free and prosperous province.

Voltaire had not only the will for such activities but the wherewithal, having decided very early that to live as he pleased in the France of his time he would have to have a bundle of money. In his first coup, he enlisted the help of a mathematician friend to outsmart a lottery conducted by the city of Paris, and made a personal profit from it of something like half a million dollars in present-day buying power. "A few months later [says Besterman] Voltaire made another killing by taking advantage of a loophole in an issue of bonds in Lorraine." He needed

> a year to attain financial security. . . . He never looked back, and though all his life he spent prodigiously, maintaining an army of relations, protégés, and servants, building, farming, lending to his tenants free or at nominal rates of interest, and publishing hundreds of books and pamphlets, and although he abandoned the vast profits from his writings to the publishers and the actors, he died one of the wealthiest commoners in Europe.

Occasionally he lost huge sums when bankers defaulted or a speculation went awry, but even when the losses came near driving him into bankruptcy he accepted them always with fatalistic good humor. They were part of his necessary gamble: some good people are content with just being good; Voltaire couldn't relax unless he was also doing good; and since for most of his life he worked between twelve and eighteen hours daily at his writing and his campaigns for social reform and the meticulous stewardship of his financial and philanthropic projects, he can't be said to have had a sybaritic idea of living as he pleased.

But Goodman Andrews is inexorable: "He was seldom careless in investing money but was not too particular in choosing who might help him puff his literary reputation"; Voltaire, it seems, was a low creature for having befriended a "hack writer" who later turned on him. The sole rational explanation of this shower of septic darts is that Andrews has sources and affidavits unavailable to the rest of us: in the gospel according to Andrews, when Voltaire goes somewhere he

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"slinks off"; when he states a fact he "brags"; when he invites somebody to his private theater it's because he wants "to be sure of an audience." The Enlightenment? It was "the conspiracy hatched to prove that all man's troubles on earth would vanish once the rule of reason was acknowledged." Rousseau? "*The Village Soothsayer* had made him the fashion, and we have his word for it that no one in Paris was more sought after than he. Taken up by Louise Dupin, the daughter of the omnipotent [?] financier Samuel Bernard . . . " Diderot? "He and his likeminded friends . . . were evidently highly pleased by the state of bliss in which they, as professional atheists, found themselves." D'Alembert? He "was nothing if not a mathematician." The Duc de Saint-Simon? He "could tolerate a poet or two when he was not wandering in the forest of family trees" (Andrews is giving the back of his hand to the greatest memoirist ever—who was curious about everything including genealogies—and a top candidate for best, brightest, strongest, most continuously substantial and engaging French writer; furthermore no atheist, no democrat, a good Catholic; but he made the mistake of praising Voltaire's poetry). There is no end of Andrews' insults to common sense and common decency; but his insults to the English language take some noticing too. He has an ear for topical cliché: "couldn't care less" twice in three pages. He suffers from a peculiar tic of verbal repetition, a kind of echolalia, trying to find a way across his grand canyons of inanity from one nastiness to the next: "She meant well but she meant panic"; "What he wrote was not a remarkable poem but it had a remarkable impact on Rousseau"; "unauthorized changes in the text [of his play] . . . did not improve Voltaire's disposition. Neither did the death of LeKain, one of his favorite actors." Pound in his letters used to refer to a certain lively avant-garde publishing house as "Nude Erections," but times change and spirits droop. On the jacket flap: "Wayne Andrews . . . is the author and editor of fifteen previous books—including *Pianos of Sympathy* (1936), written under the pseudonym Montagu O'Reilly and the very first title published by New Directions," which forty-five years ago was sympathetic to Andrews' pianos and forty-five years later may

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have published this last little sour note of his as a sort of going-away present. We're none of us getting any younger.[3]

Christians who object because Voltaire singled out Christianity as the enemy—his battle-cry, "Écrasez l'infâme [Crush the infamous thing]!" was a prudent euphemism that everybody understood—have only the history of their religion to blame; and modern Christians are liable to experience a convenient lapse of memory on the subject of those centuries of history that are genially filed if not forgotten in Berlioz' observation about Mother Church: "since she has ceased to inculcate the burning of heretics, her creeds are charming." Voltaire, however, lived while the infamies were still being perpetrated and condoned and, except by the victims and by him, scarcely noticed; he had a weak stomach for them, was sickened, angered, frightened; Haydn Mason comments, on Voltaire's preoccupation with the Calas case, that "judicial murder was horrible to him"[4]; and people for whom judicial murder was the risk run by the opposition didn't warm to a man who spent his life in a whirl of opposition, getting away with everything but murder. The French authorities would have spared themselves much trouble if many years earlier they had taken the recommendation of one of their minor functionaries, who (in Besterman's account), asked by his boss what should be done with the young troublemaker Voltaire, replied that he "should be locked up without pen, ink, and paper, for he was capable of destroying a state"—i.e. destroying that immemorial medieval compact between church and state which till the Revolution France thought of as the state, and which Wayne Andrews misses like crazy. But when Professor Haydn Mason of the University of East Anglia says in his Preface that he intends to "disclose the particular personality which could . . . undertake so many personal crusades in the cause of civilised living," we know (if only from the "s" in "civilised") that we're back on this side of the looking-glass,

[3] The chic anonymous short-notice reviewer at the ass-end of *The New Yorker*, who just dotes on cocktail-party malice and once dismissed D. H. Lawrence as a "tubercular plebeian cuckold," recognizes Andrews as a soul-mate in the September 14, 1981 issue and drips hot fudge all over his book: "spirited commentary . . . rises to a very considerable stature" (from the hideous crouch it begins with?).

[4] VOLTAIRE, by *Haydn Mason*. Johns Hopkins University Press. $14.95.

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safely among those English whom Voltaire quite held in awe for their repudiation of the medieval compact, for their toleration of opposition and difference, their philosophical rationalism, their seasoned and unintimidating mastery of the art of government, their freedom from priestcraft, their secularity, their deference to merit, their esteem for personal effort and the self-made man.

At the age of thirty-one, already taken up by the literary and aristocratic circles of France as the poet of the age, his tragedies dominating the theater, his epic poem *La Henriade* rated at the level of Virgil, Voltaire was waylaid and beaten in broad daylight by servants of a nobleman (who watched from his coach) whose rudeness to him had drawn a rude retort from the brilliant young man; and, since this was the *ancien régime*, Voltaire's furious attempts at redress brought him only as far as the Bastille. He was allowed to go into more or less voluntary exile in England, where he lived for three years; learned the language very well (after returning to France he seldom spoke or wrote it, but thirty-six years later his proficiency in it amazed James Boswell, who was visiting him at Ferney); read and revered Locke and Newton, who remained throughout his life his two great heroes (he considered Newton the greatest man who had ever lived), and whose work he introduced into France by means of letters, commentaries, and a book devoted to explaining Newton's accomplishments; came to know familiarly Pope, Swift, Gay, Arbuthnot, Bolingbroke, James Thomson, Edward Young; read *Gulliver's Travels* within a week of its publication, at once hailed Swift as "the English Rabelais" and said it was as witty and amusing as anything he had read, though later he qualified his approval (in a letter written in English): "The reader's imagination is pleasingly and charmingly entertained by the new prospects of the lands which Gulliver discovers to him, but that continued series of new fangled follies, of fairy tales, of wild inventions, palls at last upon the taste"—a prophetically apt criticism of the philosophical fiction, including *Candide,* that he himself would write many years afterward, at least partly on the model of Swift's.

He was seventy when Boswell, twenty-four years old, making the Grand Tour, arrived to pay his respects:

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> I got him to speak English, which he does in a degree that made me now and then start up and cry, "Upon my soul this is astonishing!" When he talked our language he was animated with the soul of a Briton. He had bold flights. He had humour. He had an extravagance; he had a forcible oddity of style that the most comical of our *dramatis personae* could not have exceeded. He swore bloodily, as was the fashion when he was in England. He hummed a ballad; he repeated nonsense. Then he talked of our Constitution with a noble enthusiasm. I was proud to hear this from the mouth of an illustrious Frenchman.

But Boswell wasn't one to pass up an opportunity to get under a great man's guard:

> At last we came upon religion. Then did he rage. The company went to supper. Monsieur de Voltaire and I remained in the drawing-room with a great Bible before us; and if ever two mortal men disputed with vehemence, we did. Yes, upon that occasion he was one individual and I another. For a certain portion of time there was a fair opposition between Voltaire and Boswell. The daring bursts of his ridicule confounded my understanding. He stood like an orator of ancient Rome. Tully was never more agitated than he was. He went too far. His aged frame trembled beneath him. He cried, "Oh, I am very sick; my head turns round," and he let himself gently fall upon an easy chair.

And now ringmaster Boswell moves in with whip and three-legged stool:

> He recovered. I resumed our conversation, but changed the tone. I talked to him serious and earnest. I demanded of him an honest confession of his real sentiments. He gave it me with candour and with a mild eloquence which touched my heart. I did not believe him capable of thinking in the manner that he declared to me was "from the bottom of his heart." He expressed his veneration—his love—of the Supreme Being, and his entire resignation to the will of Him who is All-wise. He expressed his desire to resemble the Author of Goodness by being good himself. His sentiments go no farther. He does not inflame his mind with grand hopes of the immortality of the soul. He says it may be, but he knows nothing of it. And his mind is in perfect tranquillity. I was moved; I was sorry. I doubted his sincerity. I called to him with emotion, "Are you sincere? are you really sincere?" He answered, "Before God, I am." Then with the fire of him whose tragedies have so often shone on the theatre of Paris, he said, "I suffer much. But I suffer with patience and resignation; not as a Christian—but as a man."

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The smiling ironist of the busts and portraits—as if he invariably fell into the same self-protective pose an instant before the shutter snapped—was, to begin with, boisterous, affectionate, excitable, indignant, a man of heart and feeling, born too early in the wrong country, having a job to do because nobody else would do it. Boswell couldn't resist asking Voltaire what he thought of Dr. Johnson: "A superstitious dog," he replied; any more than back in England he could resist asking Johnson what he thought of Voltaire and Rousseau (whom Boswell had also seen and conquered on his tour of the Continent): "Why, Sir, it is difficult to settle the proportion of iniquity between them." Johnson was always proving Voltaire's point: In the moral climate of England it was possible for a Christian and a political conservative to speak his mind as sharply and as freely in catch-as-catch-can debate on all subjects as in France it was possible only for a financially independent iconoclast living in quasi-exile one step away from the border ready at any moment to take the step whenever the authorities decided enough was enough. John Bull had had a lot of practice dealing with thirty different thriving varieties of anything (and denouncing all but the one he favored). For a Frenchman, though, the situation was trickier. When within a year after Voltaire had returned to France the actress Adrienne Lecouvreur, having played for the last time in his *Oedipe*, died a few days later in the author's arms (I regret the melodrama, but these are the facts as Besterman reports them), she was denied "last rites and consecrated burial—simply because she was an actress, and thus automatically excommunicated. At about the same time that the body of Adrienne Lecouvreur was thrown into quicklime on waste land, the English actress Anne Oldfield was buried in Westminster Abbey." Voltaire immediately dashed off an elegy denouncing "cruel priests" and "the inconstant French asleep under the empire of superstition," and concluding: "What! is it only in England that mortals dare to think? O rival of Athens, O London! happy land! You have known how to drive out, with the tyrants, the shameful prejudices that warred against you. There all can be said, and all is rewarded; no art is despised, every success is crowned with glory." Half a century later Voltaire's embalmed body, dressed "in the famous

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dressing-gown and night-cap, accompanied by a servant whose duty it was to make the corpse simulate life," traveled by coach out of Paris the night after his death to escape forever the revenge of the priests and the fate of Adrienne Lecouvreur.

Besterman's biography is so brimful of facts and so invigorating and—for all his undissimulated admiration of Voltaire—so judicious that, since it's still in print in a third edition (published 1976), the reason for Mason's doesn't appear to the naked eye unless a small book is always desirable when the standard book on the subject is big. (The reason for Andrews' book is clear enough.) Mason is an admirer too, and an honest reporter, but I can't come up with an explanation why, using (and crediting) Besterman's book, he never expresses an opinion of it[5]; and he has only two things to say in addition or contrast to what Besterman says, of which one is faddishly silly and the other a questionable though interesting inference. The first is a bit of Freudian fluff: "We may speculate on the early death of . . . [Voltaire's] mother. . . . It is . . . possible to discern . . . an emotional deprivation in his make-up which may be related to the loss of his mother when very young"; Voltaire writes to his mistress about his ill health, tells her, "You are my consolation," and Mason comments that this "appeal for loving sympathy . . . makes one wonder again about the effect of losing his mother while still very young." The second is one of those irresolvable historical puzzles which result from five thousand years of public reticence about certain private matters, and which can finally be brought up nowadays as, in Andrews' pregnant if not abortive phrase, "spice for the immature." Was Voltaire, at least when extended by the King of Prussia, a bi-guy? Having quoted an exchange of coquettishly lovelorn poems between

[5] But Professor Peter Gay of Yale does, in his condescending and uninformative review of Mason's book in *The New Republic* of August 15, 1981: Besterman's *Voltaire* "aroused and disappointed great expectations. [Besterman being] . . . an indefatigable and admiring editor, but not an historian of ideas, . . . his particular interests and peculiar judgments swamped his exhaustive account." You bet, Professor. Gay the historian of ideas would have read in Besterman a much briefer (and more accurate) characterization of Gay's own exhaustive account, *The Enlightenment*: "pretentious, but unsound and humourless." Now then, class, having read these two citations, please answer the question: Which of these two writers would be capable of reading Voltaire?

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Voltaire and King Frederick after two glorious weeks together in Berlin (Voltaire was forty-six, Frederick twenty-eight), Mason believes the worst and "must ask whether, at this time, a homosexual relationship had not been established between the two. Frederick's predilections are well known [they were too insistent, too readily indulged by an autocrat, and too exclusive—no bi-guy he—to be dissembled or hidden]; Voltaire is not however generally seen in that light. Besterman pours scorn upon Lytton Strachey for suggesting as much, reminding the reader that . . . " and the inconclusive evidence is laid out, as for instance on Mason's side of the argument: "Voltaire recalls how, at Frederick's court, 'I saw the reign of pleasures, of pure enjoyment' "; Frederick writes to one of his homosexual lovers about Voltaire's visit, that after conversation, dining, dancing, gambling, "we titillated our ears" with music, which thereupon incited "other titillations" (but Frederick may be just titillating his lover); "One wonders too what precisely Voltaire meant when he described Frederick . . . [in a letter to the President of Frederick's Academy of Illuminati] as a 'respectable, singular, and lovable prostitute.' " It was certainly a long and stormy enough relationship—of more than forty years—to qualify as an epic love affair, ranging through passionate avowals, passionate execrations, contempt, mutual lampooning, spite, hatred, reconciliations, recriminations, memories: recalling in his Memoirs his decision to accept Frederick's invitation and move to Prussia (a move that turned out to be less than permanent), Voltaire wistfully noted, "I thought I loved him."

Of course there were other considerations on both sides. To Frederick, Voltaire was not only the greatest writer but the greatest man of the age. And for his part Voltaire found himself being extravagantly wooed by the most intelligent and most cultivated king in Europe, potentially the most influential and most exemplary, who not only adored him (at first) but seemed (at first) the philosopher-king who as a polestar to the world would benignly supervise a kingdom of peace and reason, free of the perennial outrages of Christianity (for which "l'infâme" was Frederick's term till Voltaire borrowed it for his motto). No such luck. The philosopher-king turned overnight into the slyest and most brutal power-monger in

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Europe. Voltaire, writing to d'Alembert from the royal palace, warned him to stay away from Berlin with his *Encyclopédie* because "there is a prodigious number of bayonets here and very few books." The British ambassador to Frederick felt sorry for Voltaire, marooned among the "He-Muses that adorn this German Parnassus, for no female is allowed to approach this court. Males wash the linen, nurse the children, make and unmake the beds." Voltaire till he could escape (and it wasn't easy, attended by delays and humiliations at border-towns) amused himself as best he could writing books, writing letters, telling jokes about the king—e.g. about his exceptional efforts with women, the first a musician (Frederick himself was a flutist and a journeyman composer), the second a dancer: (1) "He thought he was in love with her but he was wrong. He had no vocation for the other sex"; (2) "He was a little in love with her because she had the legs of a man." (I have to admit that, beginning with the letter to d'Alembert a few sentences back, I got the quotations from Andrews, to whom I am grateful for cherishing any evidence that Voltaire wasn't having a ball and that the wicked don't always prosper.)

The current consensus on Voltaire's writing seems to be that the works which made his reputation in his own time—the neoclassical tragedies and *La Henriade*—are best left to their own devices (such as those endlessly epigrammatic alexandrine couplets dipping into which doesn't tempt one to swim against the current); that the histories were bold and useful as pioneer examples of "scientific" historical method, with their reliance on documents and eyewitnesses rather than myth and fable and the maternal surveillance of the Church, but are too superficial and impressionistic to have a lasting claim on us; that the greatest and most enduring work is the philosophical fiction (which Voltaire himself thought little of) and that his masterpiece is *Candide*. The earliest of the *contes philosophiques* is *Micromégas*, thirteen years after *Gulliver*. The hero of the tale, an inhabitant of Sirius, is twenty miles tall, and Chapter Two begins: "When His Excellency had lain down and the Secretary [an inhabitant of Saturn, a "dwarf only about two thousand yards tall"] had gone close to his face Micromégas said . . . " (and there isn't much else that can

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be done with Sirians and Saturnians, Lilliputians and Brobdingnagians). Chapter Three begins with the Saturnian's farewell to his mistress, "a pretty little brunette only thirteen hundred and twenty yards tall, who made up for her small stature by being extremely attractive":

> "Oh, you heartless creature!" she cried. "After denying you for fifteen hundred years I was just beginning to yield. I've barely spent a hundred years in your arms and now you leave me to go off on a journey with a giant from another world. Oh, I don't understand you! You've never really loved me. If you were a true Saturnian you'd be faithful. Where are you off to? What do you think you're doing? Our five moons are more stable than you, our annulus is less changeable. This is the end; I shall never love anyone again."
>
> The philosopher embraced her and shed a few tears despite his philosophy. The lady first fainted and then went off to seek consolation with a local dandy.

The travelers come to earth and learn that men are loathsome mites whose most typical exertion is to butcher each other by the tens of thousands as irrationally and horridly as possible: "The bone of contention is a heap of mud no bigger than your heel. Not that a single one of these millions of men engaged in slaughtering each other has the flimsiest claim to this heap of mud. It is merely a matter of knowing whether it will belong to a certain man called *Sultan* or another called, for some unknown reason, *Caesar*. Neither of them has ever seen or ever will see the little patch of earth in question, and hardly any of these animals bent on mutual destruction have ever seen the animal they are fighting for." To complete their education the cosmic travelers encounter a group of earthly philosophers: an Aristotelian, a Cartesian, and a Leibnitzian, each of whom expounds his fallacious notions till a Lockean sets them all straight—"I don't know *how* I think, but I do know I have invariably thought at the prompting of my senses." If this is philosophy or fiction, I'll take vanilla.

Candide has more variety, a lot more verve, and some suspense, it's as startling and horrid in its details and disasters as Voltaire can make it; but what he said about *Gulliver* will do for his own *Candide*: "that continued series of new fangled

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follies, of fairy tales, of wild inventions, palls at last upon the taste." The drawback is that in their "entertainments" both Swift and Voltaire have not so much a subject as highly visible and not remarkably sharp axes to grind: Swift lugubriously reminds us that beauty no longer beauty is when pores on damask cheek and breast loom as large as volcanic craters; Voltaire is as fixedly roguish as the smile on the face of his busts and portraits—men are simple-minded and easily gulled or treacherous and cruel, women are fickle (and, for all their mincing tears and sighs, hotter than a firecracker), war is hell, earthquakes kill tens of thousands (so how can God be good?), Jesuits (if they aren't bi-guys) either keep mistresses or bugger little boys (once during his stay in England, having dinner at Alexander Pope's, Voltaire drove Pope's mother from the table by lamenting in loud and explicit English that the assiduous and penetrating attentions of his teachers when he was a student at the Jesuit Collège Louis-le-Grand had wrecked him for life). Voltaire's *contes* are like Catholic jokes about the Pope: electric-buzzer tickles for friends of the family, in-jokes for the already mesmerized; painting by the numbers.

In the *Philosophical Dictionary* (possessing which plus bad manners the Chevalier de La Barre was under the majestic auspices of the law broken, beheaded, and burned) Voltaire doesn't try to gussy up his theses with fictional narrative, for which he has no gift; instead, from his immense reading he assembles historical anecdotes that are vertebrate enough to stand by themselves and therefore doubly effective in standing for something else:

> The renowned Wolff, professor of mathematics at the university of Halle, one day delivered a fine oration in praise of Chinese philosophy; he praised that ancient race of men who differ from us in their beard, their eyes, their nose, their ears, and their arguments; he praised, I say, the Chinese for worshiping a supreme God and loving virtue; he did the emperors of China, the *Kalao*, the tribunals, the men of letters, full justice. The justice he did the bonzes [priests] was of a different kind.
>
> Wolff, I must tell you, attracted to Halle a thousand students from every nation. There was in the same university a professor of theology named Lange, who attracted nobody; in despair at

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freezing to death alone in his lecture hall, he quite reasonably decided to ruin the professor of mathematics; following the custom of his kind, he promptly accused him of not believing in God.

Some European writers who had never been to China had claimed that the government of Peking was atheistic; Wolff had praised the philosophers of Peking, hence Wolff was an atheist. Envy and hatred never constructed a better syllogism. This argument of Lange's, supported by a cabal and a protector, was considered conclusive by the king of the land, who presented the mathematician with this formal dilemma: leave Halle in twenty-four hours or be hanged. And, excellent reasoner that he was, Wolff promptly left; his departure deprived the king of two or three hundred thousand *écus* per year which the philosopher had brought to the kingdom through the affluence of his disciples.

—which is from the entry "De la Chine" ("Concerning China"); and here is the complete entry "Foi" ("Faith"), an anecdote about the Borgia Pope:

One day, prince Pico della Mirandola met pope Alexander VI at the house of the courtesan Emilia, while Lucrezia, the holy father's daughter, was in labor. There was some uncertainty in Rome whether the child's father was the pope, or the pope's son, the duke of Valentinois, or Lucrezia's husband, Alfonso of Aragon, who was thought to be impotent. From the outset the conversation was lively. Cardinal Bembo relates part of it. "Little Pico," said the pope, "who do you think is the father of my grandson?"—"I believe it's your son-in-law," replied Pico.—"Eh! how can you believe such nonsense?"—"I believe it by faith."—"But don't you know perfectly well that an impotent man can't have children?"—"Faith," returned Pico, "consists in believing things because they are impossible; moreover, the honor of your house demands that Lucrezia's son should not be considered the fruit of incest. You make me believe in more incomprehensible mysteries than that. Am I not compelled to be convinced that a serpent spoke, that from that time on all men have been damned, that Balaam's ass talked, very eloquently too, and that the walls of Jericho tumbled down at the sound of trumpets?" Without hesitation, Pico threaded together a litany of all the marvelous things he believed. Alexander dropped on a sofa with laughter. "I believe all that just as you do," he said, "for I know that I can be saved by faith alone, and that I won't be saved by my works."

"Ah! Holy father," said Pico, "you need neither works nor faith; that's all right for poor outsiders like me; but you, you are vice-God, you can believe and do whatever you like. You have the keys to heaven; and surely St. Peter won't shut the door in your

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face. But as for me, I confess that I, being nothing but a poor prince, would need some powerful protection if I had slept with my daughter, and if I had employed the stiletto and Spanish Fly as often as your Holiness." Alexander VI had a sense of humor. "Let's talk seriously," he said to the prince della Mirandola. "Tell me what merit attaches to telling God that one is convinced of things of which, as a matter of fact, it is impossible to be convinced? What pleasure can this give God? Just between us, to say that one believes something that is impossible to believe, is to lie."

Pico della Mirandola made a great sign of the cross. "Eh! Heavenly father," he exclaimed, "may your Holiness forgive me, but you're not a Christian."—"No, upon my faith," said the pope.—"I thought not," said Pico della Mirandola.

"The resurrection [says Voltaire in the entry "Resurrection"] will take place to the sound of the trumpet, according to St. Paul. There will have to be several trumpets, for thunder itself can hardly be heard more than seven or eight miles around. There is a question how many trumpets will be needed: the theologians haven't yet calculated the number; but they will." The Emperor Frederick II (in the entry "Judea"), having reached the Holy Land on one of the Crusades and found it to be a rocky desert, deplored Moses' choice and asked, "Why didn't he go to Naples?" The *Philosophical Dictionary* is a kind of dressing-gown-and-nightcap survey, an alphabetical miscellany of anecdotal essays stringing together the history of the world; a freethinker's jokebook; the loosest possible pretext on which Voltaire breezily hung out just about everything he knew for the purpose of proving what he already believed; and he never ran short of anecdotes because he had read everything, he knew everything that was available to a European reader in the eighteenth century.

For his formal histories such a range of reading came in handy, and it shows. Surely one of the most astounding achievements in historiography and literature is Voltaire's universal history, commonly known by its short title *Essai sur les moeurs* (*Essay on Customs*), which he produced in successive drafts and continually revised and expanded for over forty years till the last year of his life, and which in its most nearly definitive edition (by René Pomeau, in 1963) comes to two thousand pages of introduction, text, and notes, this "essay on customs and the spirit of nations and on the principal

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facts of history from Charlemagne to Louis XIII." Don't let the names of those French kings fool you: Voltaire takes the great globe itself for his province: begins with chapters on geological alterations of the surface of the earth, on the races of man, on the origins of religion—all of it excellently argued and worth following in its particulars. "For all preceding historians [says Besterman] the world meant . . . Europe, and mankind was held to begin with the Bible. Voltaire . . . devotes two chapters to China, two to India, one to Persia, two to the Arabs and their religion, and mentions the Jews only in passing. Only then does Voltaire arrive at the beginning of history as then understood." The work was originally addressed to Mme. Du Châtelet (his mistress and constant companion for sixteen years, most of them in hard-working isolation in their retreat at Cirey: a natural scientist in her own right, who provoked him to undertake the *Essay* because she asked him impatiently, What's the use of history? What part of it do we need to bother with?), and in his preface Voltaire proposed "to give a general view of the nations 'who live on the earth and desolate it.' " Very little is written about the *Essay*, I imagine because it's too long and too unlikely for anybody to make the effort to read it through; but, having just read it through, I can state that it's the most consistently interesting long history I've ever read (more interesting, less pompous and less self-important, than Gibbon), not necessarily outmoded by all our discoveries and developments, and despite Voltaire's unconcealed preferences—Julian the Apostate is one of his heroes, Constantine one of his villains; the Inquisition is "a tribunal of assassins"; Alexander VI is "this monster"—wonderfully clear and conscientious in its account of the events themselves, even of the Crusades, which he considers the ultimate Christian insanity, the most outrageous episode in the history of Europe. (If I wanted to acquaint a young reader with the excitement and sweep of history I think the book I'd give him would be the *Essay*; but he'd have to read French because so far as I know there's no English translation.) My own preference, though, is for the customary Voltairean flashes: "Ferdinand the Catholic, famous for the religion and good faith he talked about ceaselessly and violated always"; "our religion . . . is doubtless divine, since seven-

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teen centuries of knaveries and imbecilities haven't been able to destroy it"; on St. Bernard preaching in Germany the necessity of a new Crusade—"Soon afterward, one of his disciples, named Philippe, wrote in France that Bernard had performed many miracles in Germany. True, there weren't any raisings of the dead; but the blind had seen, the crippled had walked, the sick had been cured. Among these prodigies may be counted the fact that he preached to the Germans everywhere in French." Voltaire's history is as un-Marxist as possible, wherever there's a will there's a way, it's a history of heroes and villains: "Almost never has anything great been done in the world except by the genius and firmness of one man"; for instance he believes that Henri IV was the only king who might with more time have headed off the religious horrors which tore France apart in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and that his assassination "changed the face of Europe."

Voltaire's most ambitious attempt to establish the rôle of the hero in history is his *Century of Louis XIV*, a full-dress formal history that in his own time made his reputation as a serious historian: it demonstrated, according to Lord Chesterfield, "how history should be written. It is the history of the human understanding, written by a man of parts for the use of men of parts. . . . His reflections are short, just, and produce others in his readers. Free from religious, philosophical, political, and national prejudices, beyond any historian I ever met with." But it suffers from what for Voltaire is a most uncharacteristic defect: the ambiguity, the uncertainty, of his attitude toward his subject. The French authorities wouldn't permit its publication in France (it was published in Berlin during Voltaire's stay at Frederick's court; almost none of Voltaire's books could be legally published, or even acknowledged by the author, in France during his lifetime, though most of them were extensively and very profitably pirated there), and Besterman thinks the reason was that the authorities "were so pathologically sensitive to criticism that Voltaire's praise of Louis XIV was seen, by contrast, as a satire on Louis XV." But from the book itself what seems rather more likely is that they saw it as a convincing eulogy of the Sun King and his epoch which (gradually, reluctantly, perhaps inadvertent-

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ly) splits off into a far more convincing representation of the monumental destructiveness of a military and religious megalomaniac who happened to be an absolute monarch. Voltaire himself seems puzzled by the drag of the material, as if it carries him where he hasn't expected to go and he isn't prepared to make his tart and spirited jokes about it: for instance when he discusses the Revocation of the Edict of Nantes, Henri IV's edict of toleration annulled by Louis because he and his advisers presumed they could eradicate Protestantism in France by depriving Protestants of their civil rights and forbidding them to leave the country—

> It was only necessary to bribe a few guards and the crowds of fugitives passed unmolested. In the course of three years nearly fifty thousand families left the kingdom and were afterwards followed by still more. They brought with them to foreign countries their arts, their manufactures, and their wealth. Nearly the whole of the north of Germany, a pastoral country possessing no industries, assumed a new aspect under the influence of these invading multitudes. They filled whole towns. They manufactured cloths, laces, hats, stockings, all of which had previously been brought from France. A whole quarter of London was populated with French silk operatives; others brought to that city the perfected art of glass-cutting, an art that was henceforth lost to France. . . . In this way France lost about five hundred thousand of her inhabitants, enormous sums of money, and, what was worst of all, arts and crafts on which her enemies grew wealthy. . . .

Match this with the unending and often merely vainglorious wars which Louis conducted with rapidly diminishing success and eventual catastrophic failure throughout his reign and which cost France a million of its young men (out of a total population of eighteen million) and turned the pauperized country over to a swarm of tax-gatherers, and there isn't much left for Louis the pattern of enlightened kingliness, the patron of the arts and of science and industry.

Yet Voltaire had already written with perfect conviction and no uncertainty of attitude, with most un-Voltairean sustained sobriety and deliberate panegyric, about another pattern of kingliness, in his earliest historical work and his masterpiece, *The History of Charles XII, King of Sweden,* which begins at a pitch of exaltation that is as uncharacteristic of Voltaire as the uncertainty of his attitude toward Louis XIV:

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> on the 27th of June, 1682, was born King Charles XII [Voltaire is anticipating: Charles didn't become king till he was fifteen], the most extraordinary man, perhaps, that ever appeared in the world. In him were united all the great qualities of his ancestors; nor had he any other fault or failing, but that he possessed these virtues in too high a degree. This is the prince whose history we now propose to write, and concerning whose person and actions we shall relate nothing but what is founded upon the best authority.

Voltaire is writing less than a generation after the major events of Charles's life, and he bases his book on the testimony of eyewitnesses: "This history," he announces in the Preface, "is composed from the relations of some persons of note who lived several years with Charles XII, and with Peter the Great, emperor of Muscovy; and who having retired, long after the death of these princes, into a country of liberty, can have no interest in hiding the truth"; and he names various of his informants, as also during his account he will indicate the living source of one or another specific piece of information the correctness of which is crucial to his account. As for that pitch of exaltation, it may well be the only conspicuous instance in Voltaire of a breach of his rule that there is no alternative to a shadowless clarity of statement as he prescribes it in *The Century of Louis XIV*: "what may be explained in several ways is not worth explaining in any." He is so struck by Charles's distinctness and separateness, by his resistance to classification or qualification, by his inaccessibility to the feelings that oblige even great men to manifest the weaknesses lovable or otherwise of the rest of mankind, by the unflawed homogeneity of his nature, by his invulnerability to the shafts of wit and satire, that the champion of clarity can't settle on a less vibrant word than "extraordinary": i.e. more a matter of out of the ordinary and not to be met with than greatest, noblest, best, though not excluding any of these possibilities. Charles the warrior-king is one of a kind, and Voltaire lays down his arms before him.

Charles became Charles because he had an opponent redoubtable enough to test him from the first: Peter the Great, who "joined the kings of Poland and Denmark against a child they despised" in order to pick off for himself some prime

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Swedish territory. When the royal counselors apprehensively brought the news to the idle and frivolous young king, "they saw him at once bid farewell to the most innocent amusements of youth":

> The moment he began to make preparations for the war, he entered on a new course of life, from which he never afterward deviated in a single instance. Full of the idea of Alexander and Caesar, he proposed to imitate those two conquerors in every thing but their vices. No longer did he indulge himself in magnificence, sports, and recreations: he reduced his table to the most rigid frugality. He had formerly enjoyed gayety and show; but from that time he was never dressed otherwise than as a common soldier. He was supposed to have entertained a passion for a lady of his court: whether there was any foundation for this supposition does not appear; what is certain is that he ever after renounced all commerce with women, not only for fear of being governed by them, but besides to set an example of continence to his soldiers, whom he resolved to confine within the strictest discipline; perhaps, too, from the vanity of being thought the only king who could conquer a passion so difficult to overcome. He also determined to abstain from wine during the rest of his life. . . .

In May 1700, at the age of seventeen, he left Stockholm (never to return) at the head of his army. When they were about to disembark near Copenhagen he "jumped into the sea, sword in hand, the water coming above his waist," and he and his party "marched up to the shore amid a shower of musket-shot from the enemy. The king, who had never in his life before heard a discharge of muskets loaded with ball, asked Major Stuart, who stood next to him, what was signified by that whistling he heard. 'It is the noise of the musket-balls which they are firing at you,' replied the major. 'Very well,' said the king, 'henceforward that shall be my music.' " Within six weeks he defeated the Danes; turned at once and marched on the Russians at Narva who were under the personal command of Peter (against whom "he was the more exasperated . . . as there were still at Stockholm three Muscovite ambassadors, who had lately sworn to the renewal of an inviolable peace. Possessed of the most incorruptible integrity, he could not conceive how a legislator like the tsar should make a jest of what ought to be held so sacred"), and with his army of eight thousand men routed eighty thousand Rus-

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sians, whom after the battle he supplied with boats and allowed to cross the river safely back to their own country. Having wintered in Narva, he completed the overthrow of the alliance against him by defeating the Polish army and dethroning the King of Poland. Charles was now eighteen, and would live eighteen years longer.

It's a career almost too grandiose and symmetrical to be credited. For nine of his last eighteen years Charles seemed invincible, the new Alexander, the conqueror of the world. In 1709 he met the Russians at the battle of Poltava, where Peter, on the verge of a defeat that might have meant the end of his empire, with quite a bit of luck was able to rally his forces and at length scatter and finish off the Swedish army. The following nine years Charles spent mostly in exile (among the Turks, who gave him and his small retinue asylum on their escaping after Poltava, and who were spectacularly reminded of his prowess—with sixty attendants he held off an entire Turkish army in hand-to-hand combat—when they tried to induce him to leave their country before he was ready: "The janissaries fell on him from all sides; they were animated by the promise the pasha had made of eight gold ducats to each of them who would merely have touched his clothes, in case they were able to take him. He wounded and killed all who came near him. A janissary he had wounded leaned a blunderbuss on his face; if the Turk's arm hadn't been jostled by the crowd coming and going like waves, the king was dead: the ball grazed his nose, carried off the tip of his ear, and went on to break the arm of General Hord, whose fate it was to be always wounded by the side of his master") and at last in a last fling of battles that stopped abruptly at the siege of a Norwegian town when Charles walked out one night to inspect his trenches and was killed instantly by a cannon ball: "Though he expired the moment he received the wound, yet by a kind of instinctive motion he had grasped the hilt of his sword in his hand, and still lay in that posture."

Isaiah Berlin wrote a study of Tolstoy called *The Hedgehog and the Fox*, of which the title comes from a line by Archilochus: "The fox knows many things, but the hedgehog knows one big thing." In Voltaire's historical drama Peter is the fox,

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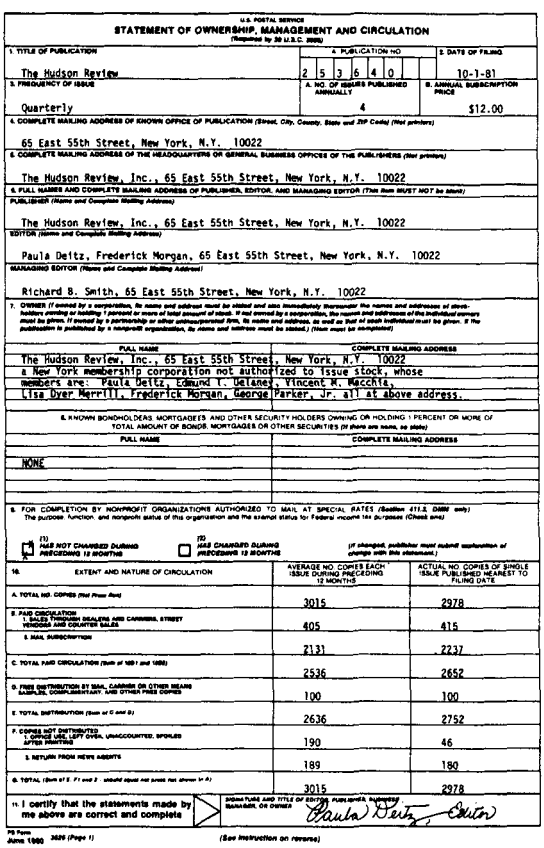
and if Charles fits into any category at all he's the hedgehog, as Voltaire contrasts them on the day of the battle of Poltava: "Charles XII, illustrious for nine years of victories; Peter Alexeyevich for nine years of pains taken to form troops equal to those of Sweden: the one glorious for having given away dominions, the other for having civilized his own ["Thus it was that one man changed the face of the greatest empire"]: Charles, fond of dangers, and fighting for glory alone; Alexeyevich, scorning to fly from danger, and never making war but from interested views: the Swedish monarch, liberal from an innate greatness of soul . . .": it's hard for a fox like Voltaire not to have a reflective and rueful affection for the No. 1 hedgehog (so unlike Frederick, in whom Voltaire would discover a fox like himself). Just the difference must have been enough. Moreover, what one man does can be the wonder of the world.



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BORIS PASTERNAK

Winter Approaches

Winter approaches. And once again
The secret retreat of some bear
Will vanish under impassable mud,
To a tearful child's despair.

Little huts will awaken in lakes
Reflecting their smoke like a path.
Encircled by autumn's cold slush,
Life-lovers will meet by the hearth.

Inhabitants of the stern North,
Whose roof is the open air,
'In this sign conquer' is written
On each inaccessible lair.

I love you, provincial retreats,
Off the map, off the road, past the farm.
The more thumbed and grubby the book,
The greater for me its charm.

Slow lines of lumbering carts,
You spell out an alphabet leading
From meadow to meadow. Your pages
Were always my favourite reading.

And suddenly here it is written
Again, in the first snow—the spidery
Cursive italic of sleigh runners—
A page like a piece of embroidery.

A silvery-hazel October.
Pewter shine since the frosts began.
Autumnal twilight of Chekhov,
Tchaikovsky and Levitan.

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The Old Park

A small boy in a little bed.
Savagely roars the storm.
Nines of cawing rooks fly off,
Scatter and re-form.

A doctor in a white coat
Was swabbing a stitched limb,
When the patient recognized
A childhood friend, his fathers' home.

Again he's in the old park.
Frosty mornings flash again,
And when they put on compresses,
Tears run down the outer pane.

Voices of this century,
And visions of the last
Interweave as nurses' hands
Make his bandage fast.

People walk across the ward,
Doors bang in the corridor.
Gun batteries thud dully
Beyond the lake's far shore.

Lower sinks the setting sun.
It pierced the creek, withdrew,
And levelling its lance,
It runs the distance through.

And two minutes later, outside,
Into the craters flow
Wave on wave of emerald
As in a magic lantern show.

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Pain attacks more fiercely,
Stronger the wind, fiercer the storm,
And nines of rooks, black nines of clubs
Scatter and re-form.

Turbulence contorts the limes,
Wind bends them to the ground,
And hearing the branches groan,
The patient forgets his wound.

Legends have aged the park.
Napoleon camped here
And Samarin the Slavophil
Served and was buried near.

Descendant of the Decembrist,
Great-grandson of a heroine,
Here he shot at cawing crows
And overcame Latin.

If only he has strength enough,
The new enthusiast will
Revise his great-grandfather's works,
Edit the Slavophil.

He himself will write a play
Inspired by the war,
Thinks the patient lying there,
Hearing the forest roar.

The unimaginable course
Of life undreamt-of then
Will be plotted and revealed
By a provincial pen.

[*Translated from the Russian by Jon Stallworthy and Peter France*]

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ANNA AKHMATOVA

Five Poems

Under the Icon

Under the icon, a threadbare rug,
It's dark in the chilly room.
The wide window is overgrown
With ivy, thick, dark-green.

A sweet scent streams from the roses;
The icon lamp creaks, barely aglow.
Here are the chests, gaily painted
By the craftsman's loving hand.

Near the window, the white lace frame . . .
Your profile is delicate, severe.
Under your shawl you conceal, ashamed,
The fingers he has kissed.

Your heart began to beat so wildly;
It's full of anguish now . . .
And in your dishevelled braids
Lurks a trace of tobacco smell.

1912

Kiev,

The ancient city, as though deserted . . .
My arrival is strange.
Over its river Vladimir raised
A black cross.

Dark are the rustling lime trees,
And the elms along the gardens,

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And the diamond needles of the stars
Are lifted out toward God.

Here I will finish my journey,
My path of sacrifice and glory,
And with me only you,
My equal, my love.

1914

For Us To Lose Freshness

For us to lose freshness of words and simplicity of feeling,
Isn't it the same as for a painter to lose his sight?
Or an actor, his voice and the use of his body?
Or a beautiful woman, her beauty?

But it's useless to try to save
This heaven-sent gift for yourself.
We are condemned—and we know this ourselves—
Not to hoard it, but to give it away.

Walk alone and heal the blind,
That you may know in the heavy hour of doubt,
The gloating mockery of your disciples,
The indifference of the crowd.

1915

Ah! You've Come Back

Ah! You've come back. You've come into this house
And the look you give me is not the look
Of an enamoured youth, but of a man,
A daring, stern, inflexible man.
My soul is frightened by the lull before the storm.
You ask me what I've done with you,
Forever entrusted to me by love and by fate.
I have betrayed you. And to have to repeat—
Oh, if only you'd get tired!
This is how a dead man speaks,

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Disturbing the sleep of his murderer.
This is how the Angel of Death waits by the bed.
Forgive me now. The Lord has taught us to forgive.
My flesh is tormented by sorrow and pain
And my spirit, freed, already sleeps, serene.
I remember only the garden,
Tender, autumnal, so easy to walk through,
The black of the fields, the cry of the cranes . . .
Oh, how sweet was the earth for me with you!

1916, Summer
Slepnevo

The Twenty-First

The twenty-first. Night. Monday.
The outlines of the capital are dim.
Some idler invented the idea
That there's something in the world called love.

And from laziness or boredom
Everyone believed it and began to live
As if it were so: they wait for meetings,
Fear partings and sing the songs of love.

But the secret, revealed, will be different,
And a hush will fall on them all . . .
I stumbled on this by accident
And since then have been somehow unwell.

1917

[*Translated from the Russian by Judith Hemschemeyer and Anne Wilkinson*]

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ROBERT LUHN

Prelude to the Horizon of the Thirties

(Excerpts from an author's journal)

SPRING 1925

Ah! The air was slippery today! Decided to go down to Central Park. Saw Edna St. Vincent Millay feeding tacks to some ducks by the pond. Thought it odd, but she did it with such spirit, which is just like Edna. Seeing her in such a playful mood resolved in my mind any doubts I might have had about our relationship. I decided then and there that I would ask her to marry me, or at least consider fooling around.

Description

Languid drops of lambent, humid air drooled lightly down the edge of my anti-macassar.

Went to see Crowninshield for a job at Vanity Fair as a literary critic.

"What the hell do *you* want?" he queried, with the characteristic churlishness I later came to love.

I told him I was seeking employment as a literary critic. Crowny (as I was later to call him) impishly asked if I had ever read any books and I assured him I had. (Actually, it was merely a show of bravado. I *hadn't* read any books yet, but I knew that it was only a matter of time before I did so.) This pleased Crowny to no end and he asked if I also knew how to write. I said yes and produced a pencil to prove it.

"Okay" he said, "you can do some proof-reading. But if I catch you with your hands in the till, out you go!"

I was damp with perspiration. I thanked him and hurriedly left his office and slipped and fell down two flights of stairs, landing squarely on my pencil. It was broken into a thousand iridescent fragments. It seemed appropriate.

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Winter 1926

Saw Edna Millay in the hall today outside of Crowny's office. Asked if she thought the weather was "hot enough for her." She looked at me with thinly veiled contempt and swept by me without uttering a word. I thought her attitude odd, considering the poem I had mailed to her the day before:

Love is old
Love is new
Love's the stuff
That makes you brew.
Yaaaaaay love!

I felt that such a poem could not fail to stir something within Edna's heart. And I felt surely that I had made a definitive statement about something Edna had been so desperately trying to express in her own verse. Maybe she is jealous of me.

(Note: I later found out that I was wrong. Edna wasn't jealous at all. I found that I had left the poem in my hat. Quelle surprise!)

Idea:

Going to a party and having everyone drink cocktails and getting drunk. Having naked girls jump out of birthday cakes! Balloons and punch!

Yellow and red lights merging on a distant plane, becoming orange. A delight.

Party last night. Saw Scott Fitzgerald. Zelda and a polar bear. Benchley and Dottie Parker getting "blotto." Billie Burke with her skirt over her head. Tried to discuss honeymoon plans with Edna Millay, but she just smiled and pushed me into the punch bowl. Lillian Hellman and Dashiell Hammett. George Gershwin and his wife Ira. William Shakespeare and Will Rogers trading quips under a Hepplewhite. Hemingway insulting Dottie and getting kicked where "the sun also rises." Lynn Fontanne yelling "twenty-three skidoo!"

Drunk again.

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Summer 1926

Reviewed Emil Zanos's *Pictorial History of Tooth Decay* (Farrar and Rinehart) and compared it favorably to *Swann's Way* and *Bleak House.* Crowny called me into his office and ripped my critique up and called me a "twerp" who had the judgment of a "porcupine in heat." I could sense that something was bothering him and I hurriedly left his office and slipped and fell down two flights of stairs. Must remember to use the elevator next time.

Midnight

Couldn't sleep. Edna is constantly on my mind. Have already picked out a silver and china pattern, but Edna is still being coy and hasn't talked to me for nearly 2 years. Maybe she is jealous of me.

Felt depressed and decided I might as well work on a novel. Started writing about 12:30 and finished first draft of *The Prurient Malcontent* by two. Had a boy take a copy over to my publishers and I had my galleys corrected by four. At seven, I had breakfast and went down to the Automat to autograph first pressings. George S. Kaufman came by and borrowed a dime and had some cheesecake and left.

Thought:

Blue, blue visions of a night already past. He noticed how her bosoms caused a slight bulge in her sweater, like a ripple in a sea of cashmere. Eternity.

Joke:

He: Why is a crow?
She: Caws.

Spring 1927

Finished *Sex for the Living* and went out on the town to celebrate. Got into "21" about two in the morning and ran into Carl van Doren, who was drunker than both of us put together. We talked awhile and I could tell that something was bothering him from the way he kept dropping his head on the table and snoring. He finally broke down and confessed that he had been having an affair with Edna Millay and felt

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like a "damn sis." In spite of my anger, I couldn't help but feel sorry for Carl, particularly when he told me he had spent the royalties from his last book on a rotisserie for Edna. When I told him of my pending engagement to Edna, he started snoring uncontrollably and I left, disgusted.

Any man who could get so emotional over a rotisserie was not my idea of a lover for Edna.

Summer 1927

Cold today. So cold you could put a herring in your sheets and not notice it. But the weather doesn't bother me. All I have to do is think of Edna. Ah! She warms me like a hot window pane.

Tried to get Edna on the phone this week, but I haven't had much luck. I think she has changed her number again. How long can she play this silly game?

Every time I call her, she hangs up the phone just to tease me. Then she has her number changed. Once she called the police as a prank and it took me three days to get released. Edna and her jokes!

She is a spirited girl, that's for sure.

Fall 1927

Decided to go down to Central Park. Saw some ducks feeding Edna Millay down by the pond. Must remember to get some tacks.

Winter 1928

Went to Crowny's office today to talk about my article on colon obstructions, but he brushed my questions aside and told me that I was fired and that my career as a proof-reader was over. I was damp with perspiration. I thanked him and hurriedly left his office and slipped and fell *up* two flights of stairs.

It seemed appropriate.

The End

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JEAN NORDHAUS

The Death of an Immigrant Mother

There is always an uncle
for afterward
one of your own kind
to lead you, an orphan, back out
into the too-bright kitchen.

Shy horses, your light-shocked eyes
plunge back into darkness
forgotten details
climbing out of the deathroom
like fabled fish
or deep sea divers rising.

Candlewax, grief, old medicine rags.
The rosehooked rugs.
The windowshades yellowed with singe.

It seemed a long way
across the room in the dark
the lamps with their eyes cast down
branding the objects on the tables
with their scrutiny

globe shining on glass
like a moon on dark water,
spoon swimming over
a waffleweave towel

—a long way over water
toward a kiss

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you can barely remember.

The upholstery you passed
was soft and dark like her body,
brocaded with flowers of courtesy
in Old Bulgarian

but the wood was hard, light,
American as an uncle's hand
—the ship you would sail out on.

My Father Blowing Smoke Rings

O you said
and O again and O

your mouth no wider
than a wedding ring,
the silent words emerging
clear as commands.

I slip my arm through bracelets
to adorn myself with smoke.
They fatten into bridal wreathes,
shred into shawls around my shoulders.

As if you were about to speak,
I time my breath to yours,
lips pursing to a syllable
that never sounds

and o and o again and
you are a train sliding
into a tunnel, smaller
with every breath.

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GREG KUZMA

Two AM, January

The furnace has come on.
And now the air which had hung cool
in the big pipes and the little pipes
stirs, ascends, as the warm air comes.
And I myself stir as one awakening
or who, suddenly, thinks newly of something.
The furnace has come on
and the great house shakes and stirs
as the big fan
whirrs in the dark over the burner plate
and the children startled at the sound
break into another room of dream
in which some heated thing pants
and in a corner whirrs
and the room warms
and the blankets hang on them,
and the drapes sway
as if underwater and the moon stays.

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ROBERT ASAHINA

Theatre Chronicle

"I HAVE A CONFESSION TO MAKE," Lisa (Brooke Adams) tells Philip (Ben Masters). "I haven't been seeing other men." Shocked by this betrayal of the spirit, if not the letter, of the terms of their "open" relationship, he can only blurt, dumbfounded, "For how long?"

This key exchange occurs about halfway through Kevin Wade's *Key Exchange*, which takes its title from the small but significant show of commitment that Lisa wants from Philip: an exchange of keys to each other's apartment. She does not want marriage (yet) or even an exclusive arrangement (although she asks him, "Can't you lie once in a while?"). She simply "can't do casual any more." But Philip is not ready for a "relationship"—"I knew that word would show up," he gripes.

Wade obviously has an ear for the idiom of "upwardly mobile" career-minded men and women now in their early thirties—the unhappy legatees of the sexual revolution. ("It's very complicated," for example, means "I don't want to talk about that.") And *Key Exchange* does strike a rather sensitive societal nerve, zeroing in on the self-indulgence masked as independence endemic to these "baby boomers," whose specious sense of freedom always makes them prefer the possibility of something better, no matter how far-fetched, to the reality of something good. Philip's reluctance to grant Lisa access to his apartment, for example, does not mean that he is dissatisfied with her. He merely does not want to run the remote risk of finding someone else and then having Lisa walk in on them unannounced. "I can't chance an awkward situation like that," he explains lamely.

But this situation cannot sustain our interest for very long. Wade's snatches of clever dialogue and his accurate perception of a social ill are not enough to turn this situation comedy into a satire. The biggest problem with *Key Exchange* is that neither Philip nor Lisa develops believably. Instead, after that crucial discussion, they simply reverse their attitudes in an unpersuasive flip-flop: he eventually desires more of a commitment from her, while she starts to enjoy the freedom he always claimed he wanted her to.

Along the way, another character, Michael (Mark Blum), serves as a rather crude foil to each—and to both. The three meet on a Sunday afternoon one summer while bicycling in Central Park, and the following eight scenes of the play cover their encounters on the subsequent eight Sundays. On the first, we learn that Michael has just married his long-time live-in lover (while Philip and Lisa have care-

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fully kept their options open); on the fifth, that his wife has left him for another man (just as we learn that Lisa has not been unfaithful); on the seventh, that he has begun to look for another woman (just as Philip starts to realize that he truly wants Lisa alone); on the ninth, that he and his wife are getting back together (just as Philip and Lisa are breaking up, or at least moving further apart).

This summary may be a little schematic, but it is no more so than the play itself, which is impelled not by any plot or character logic but by the will of its author. There really is no dramatic reason why all of the trio's meetings should occur on the bicycle paths in Central Park on successive Sundays (except perhaps to excite that sense of familiarity that New York audiences too often mistake for an aesthetic response). Surely there is no theatrical reason, either. In the opening scene we do find out a lot about the characters just from their clothes ("serious sports outfits"—designer T-shirts and shorts, cycling caps and expensive sneakers) and their equipment (imported ten-speed racers fitted with water bottles). But it eventually becomes tiresome to watch the three wheel their bicycles around the small stage, since we learn nothing more about them from their attire or their activity—except that they apparently do not have any better way of spending their weekends.

To be sure, there are limits to what can be done with a three-character drama. But Wade has padded the play with bits that would work better in a comedic routine: Philip's monologue about what he imagines to be the glories of life in France; Michael's soliloquy about being forced, because of a pledge made in college, to dance "the gator" at his wedding to the tune of Gary "U.S." Bonds's "Quarter to Three" (which was a hit, by the way, when the character would have been in grade school). And the two male roles are "typed" with the kind of quirky traits that would appear amusing only to an advertising copy writer (which Michael is supposed to be in the play): Michael's obsessive interest in women's underwear; Philip's aversion to Chinese food ("I don't want to eat anything called 'curd' "), which incidentally sounds a false note in Wade's otherwise (too) carefully orchestrated series of Upper East Side clichés.

Only Lisa's needs and words convey any conviction, and they probably owe their felt reality as much to Adams' raspy charm as to Wade's pen. Whereas the male characters mask their feelings behind arch banter, she expresses herself straightforwardly and, at times, even poignantly (except at the unbelievable conclusion, when she adopts both Philip's attitudes and his evasive manner of speaking). Unfortunately, the monologue that "types" her character—a sentimental account of her father's love for her mother—seems to have been brought in from another play.

The same is true of Terry Ariano's set, which appears to have

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been built, board by board, from the ruins of the bridge that Michael Yeargan constructed last year for Andrei Serban's production of *The Sea Gull*. It features a movable platform of blond wood, apparently representing an outcropping of rock in Central Park, behind which is a tower of wood, representing—what? The sheer face of a cliff? The trunk of a giant tree?

Whatever it is, the director, Barnet Kellman, does have the three performers execute some fancy maneuvers around it—no mean feat on bicycles, since the stages at both the W.P.A. Theatre (where *Key Exchange* opened last summer) and the Orpheum Theatre (its current home) are rather confined. But otherwise his direction is uninspired and occasionally confusing. Sometimes the characters seem aware of the music that signals the scene changes (The Cars' "My Best Friend's Girl," for instance, which comments crudely on the action), while other times they do not. If this were a better production, or if *Key Exchange* were a better play, I would try to search for the irony motivating such behavior. But both are totally lacking in the distance from the characters' lives that is necessary for genuine irony instead of easy laughs.

The same cannot be said of Caryl Churchill's *Cloud 9*—at least not its first act, which is a dizzying and delectable farce. The setting is an unnamed British colony in Africa, 100 years ago. "We're not in this country to enjoy ourselves," Clive, the colonial governor, reminds his wife, Betty. And the hypocrisy underlying that unvarnished expression of the "white man's burden" becomes the theme on which Churchill spins a string of perverse and hilarious variations.

Her emphasis is on both "white" and "man"—on race and sex, though particularly on the latter. From the first scene, Churchill—ably aided and abetted by Tommy Tune, the director of the Theatre de Lys production—is clearly intent on upsetting our preconceptions about both. It is immediately obvious that Betty is played by a man (Zeljko Ivanek), and her young son, Edward, by a woman (Concetta Tomei). The black houseboy, Joshua, is played by a white man (Don Amendolia), and the family's nanny, Ellen, and the neighboring widow, Mrs. Saunders, by a single actress (E. Katherine Kerr), who in her alternating roles lusts after both wife and husband. To top it all off, the baby sister, Victoria, is "played" by herself—a rag doll. Only the visiting white hunter, Harry Bagley (Nicolas Surovy), Betty's mother, Maud (Veronica Castang), and Clive (Jeffrey Jones) manage to escape this sex/role confusion—at least for the time being.

By mismatching the performers with their stage roles, Churchill underscores the artificiality and conventionality of the characters' sex roles. A clever theatrical idea thus serves a dramatic purpose, and the sexual shenanigans that result give rise to more than just the predictable cheap laughs. When Bagley reveals himself to be ri-

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otously polymorphous in his perversity, for example, we are constantly nudged off balance as we watch his simultaneously risible and alarming advances toward Betty, Edward, Joshua and even Clive (who asks, horrified, "This sort of thing could destroy the Empire—you don't do it with the natives do you?"). Our repugnance toward Harry's pederastic involvement with Edward, for example, is given a twist by our recognition that the latter is played by a young woman, just as our amusement at Harry's adulterous liaison with Betty is skewed by our knowledge that the latter is played by a young man. Likewise, when the timid Edward finally shows some spunk by dressing down Joshua, his mother cheers ("Edward, you were wonderful!"), while we are plunged into a jungle of conflicting feelings about what it means for a "boy" (with the quotation marks very much supplied by the casting) to become a man, when masculinity is defined in terms of sexual as well as racial superiority.

We are still reeling from Act One when Churchill throws us for another loop at the beginning of Act Two. It is now one hundred years later, in contemporary London, but the characters have aged only twenty-five years, thus maintaining a continuity with the past that paradoxically underscores the passage of time and the change in mores. Edward is now fully grown and a homosexual, played by the actor (Jones) who previously appeared as the character's father—who had continually urged his son to be a man ("The boy has no right to have feelings"). Victoria is no longer a rag doll but a mother and a lesbian; she is played by the actress (Tomei) who appeared before as the character's (then-incipient) homosexual brother. Her lover, Lin, is played by the actress (Castang) who originally appeared as Betty's mother, while her brother's lover, Gerry, is played by the actor (Ivanek) who previously appeared as the siblings' mother, Betty. (Thus Ivanek and Jones are a couple once again, though their characters are very different.) Betty, in turn, is played by a different performer (Kerr) in Act Two, though at least one of the same sex. Lin's young daughter, Cathy, however, is played by the obviously not young and just as clearly not female actor (Amendolia) who appeared before as Joshua. Meanwhile, the same actor who played Harry (Surovy) reappears as Victoria's estranged husband, Martin, who could not be less polymorphous or perverse.

Sound confusing? Well, it is, but Act Two unfortunately lacks the delightful and profoundly disturbing satirical quality of Act One. The second act begins, for example, with Gerry's earnest and explicit monologue about a very brief encounter (homosexual) on a train, and ends with Betty's equally humorless and unembarrassed paean to the joys of masturbation. In between, rather than writing (and casting) against type to jar our expectations and expose the shallowness of sexual stereotypes, Churchill has the characters and the performers fulfill them in the dreariest possible way. Edward is

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pathetic and effeminate (even declaring, "I think I'm a lesbian," a line that would have been funnier if a woman had been playing his part), Victoria doesn't have orgasms with Martin, Gerry complains that Edward is "getting to be like a wife," and so on.

To be sure, it is perfectly legitimate for Churchill to try to impart some seriousness retrospectively by bringing the characters off Cloud 9 to earth after the intermission. We should not expect that the second act will continue in the farcical vein of the first, which is broader than it is deep. But the plodding realism of Act Two seems to be motivated more by political than by aesthetic considerations. Churchill belongs to the loose coalition of vaguely Marxist playwrights in England who emerged in the mid-seventies from the radical theater movement called The Fringe, which arose during the late sixties in reaction against the psychologistic tradition that had dominated the British stage since the appearance of Osborne and Pinter. Along with Edward Bond, Howard Brenton, David Hare and others, Churchill has written plays (several others before *Cloud 9*, which is her first to be produced in America) that are sweepingly critical not only of capitalist society but of the conventions of the bourgeois stage, with its alleged privatization of experience (as in the works of the so-called "angry young men," whose problems, or so it is charged, are more personal than political).

Although the first act of *Cloud 9* is very much in accordance, aesthetically and politically, with this ambitious critique, it nonetheless succeeds as a rather old-fashioned satire, because there is very little at stake. No one today would defend the racist and sexist attitudes of Victorian colonials; the only problem facing a contemporary playwright is coming up with clever new ways of savaging those old beliefs, and Churchill certainly succeeds in doing so.

To oversimplify somewhat, her problem in Act Two, by contrast, is to show how (or whether) sexual behavior is just as entangled with the fate of Empire today as it was a hundred years ago. Yet the blurring of the boundary between public and private over the past century has eliminated the easiest target of the satirist—hypocrisy. Sex is hardly the "dirty little secret" that it was to the Victorians; indeed, there are precious few secrets regarding sexual behavior these days.

So Churchill is seemingly stuck with presenting her characters more or less at face value. Indeed, her avowed liberationist convictions almost force her to take seriously their behavior and attitudes (feminism, radical lesbianism, gay liberation), which seem—regardless of one's personal politics—as richly deserving of satire as any of a century ago (or any others found today). So the caustic witticisms of Act One give way to the didactic exhortations of Act Two, and ideology triumphs over sensibility.

A satirist who cut much deeper than Churchill was her countryman Joe Orton, who died, violently, at the hands of his (male) lover

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in 1967. Orton's *Entertaining Mr. Sloane*, first produced in London in 1964, has just been restaged by John Tillinger at the Cherry Lane Theatre, and it is easy to see why Terence Rattigan called it "the best first play" he had seen in thirty years.

"Like all great satirists, Joe Orton was a realist," claims his biographer, John Lahr, whose assessment is a variation on the adage that the essence of comedy is playing straight. And the chief virtue of the new production of *Sloane* is that, for the most part, it is played absolutely deadpan. Churchill could have learned a thing or two from Orton's shrewd understanding of how the most vicious satire can be combined with the most conventional, realistic form to produce the blackest comedy.

From the moment that Sloane (Maxwell Caulfield) appears at the home of Kath (Barbara Bryne) and her elderly father, Kemp (Gwyllum Evans), it is clear that the production is strictly in keeping with Orton's perversely deadeye view of the awful desperation of lower-middle-class British life in the early sixties. The parlor (wonderfully designed by Mark Haack) is a nightmare of petit bourgeois gentility: horrible flocked wallpaper, tattered doilies on the arms of worn velvet furniture, a glass-door cabinet proudly displaying vulgar china. Kath, all aflutter in a worn, pink-and-blue-striped housecoat, is a repulsive embodiment of every middle-aged female's worst image of herself. Kemp, irascible and rude, makes old age seem as disgusting as he obviously finds it. Ed (Joseph Maher), the estranged brother, a homosexual, would rightly be labeled oily if his lubricity hadn't made him so elusive. And Sloane is such a blank cipher that it comes as no surprise when he quickly becomes the focus of the other characters' twisted fears and desires.

Orton builds his bizarre drama of lust (heterosexual and homosexual), furtive sex, illegitimacy, sibling rivalry, jealousy, generational conflict, bullying (psychological and physical) and blackmail—which climaxes first in Sloane's murder of Kemp and then in Kath's and Ed's breathtakingly amoral and grotesquely motivated coverup of the crime—by piling revealing detail upon detail: Kath's pathetically genteel inverted sentences ("That I could not say"); Kemp's obsessive concern with the "felony" of masturbation; Ed's sentimental recollections of his "mate," stolen years before by his sister.

And when Caulfield says "wont" for "want," or Bryne turns "food" into a two-syllable word, or Maher sinuously repeats Caulfield's "no" (Sloane's answer to Ed's asking if he has any girlfriends), making it convey equal parts of curiosity, lust and invitation, we know that the cast is attuned not just to Orton's language (even convincingly ending their declarative sentences with the characteristic rising inflection of the lower-middle-class Englishman) but to its social and cultural connotations. Likewise, when Maher automatically plucks at the crease of his trousers after sitting down or instinctively polishes his briefcase with the sleeve of his jacket, we

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see that the players understand how the smallest gesture can convey a lifetime of exaggerated concern for the superficial.

To be sure, there are a few lapses in the acting and directing. Although Orton clearly stipulated that his intention was to "break down all the sexual compartments that people have"—that Kath, Ed and Sloane should not regarded as "the nympho," "the queer" and "the psycho" (as he called them)—the cast occasionally falls back on stereotyped gestures and readings. Maher is the worst offender—stammering, interrupting the arc of his sentences with all too noticeable breaths, and even limply extending one hand while burying the other in his pocket. And Tillinger errs badly (though it is the only time) at the end of the play by allowing the satire to degenerate into slapstick. Kath and Ed are quarreling about whether to turn Sloane over to the police, and Ed shakes his sister violently, jarring loose her false teeth. After she scrambles on her hands and knees to find them, Tillinger for no good reason has her retrieve them near Ed's feet and then rise to her knees between his legs. To say the least, this staging gives an odd slant to the pleas Sloane makes during her mad activity that Ed "persuade her" to join in a coverup.

On the whole, however, this production more than satisfactorily reveals the force of Orton's writing. Seventeen years after it was first staged and fourteen years after the playwright's death, *Entertaining Mr. Sloane* is still an insightful commentary on the sexual and social role confusion that is considerably more widespread now than when it was written. I regrettably doubt that *Key Exchange* or *Cloud 9* will survive as long.

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Reviews

WILLIAM H. PRITCHARD

Byronic Epistles

LIVING IN RAVENNA IN 1819, Byron wrote Count Giuseppe Alborghetti a polite letter which concluded with assurances about the Count's literary style: "I congratulate you . . . on your English—I am *not* 'the greatest poet' &c. as you are pleased to say—and if I were you need not be afraid as you have written very good English prose—a better thing when well done than poetry at any time." An extraordinary thing to say, especially since he sounds as if he believes it. And Byron would be amused at the chorus of praise his own prose has received over the last nine years in which Leslie Marchand's edition of the letters and journals has appeared.[1] Claims for him as one of the greatest letter writers have been made; *Newsweek* has saluted the "sinewy, funny, electrifying" nature of these "emergency bulletins"; the Modern Language Association has awarded them a prize for being "the fullest portrayal of [his] complex nature." Having previously encountered Byron through his letters only in small doses, I must admit to mixed feelings about the whole affair, since I can't imagine who, except the Byron scholar, would want to sit down and read through all 3000 letters. If one doesn't want to spend much of the summer at it, the 400-page Everyman's selection is still the place to go to hear him reveal himself over the course of a life. Though one will be misled by this earlier selection: for example, in reading the last letter Byron wrote to Tom Moore it might be assumed that he really signed it "Ever and affectionately yours," when in fact Byron, annoyed by the tone of Moore's recent letter to him, actually wrote "ever and truly yrs," which was a cut below his usual warmth, and Moore affectionately doctored it up so as not to lose face with his public. But enough plaudits have been

[1] BYRON'S LETTERS AND JOURNALS, ed. by *Leslie A. Marchand.* Belknap Press of Harvard University Press. IN MY HOT YOUTH: Volume 1, 1798–1810. $15.00. FAMOUS IN MY TIME: Volume 2, 1810–1812. $15.00. ALAS! THE LOVE OF WOMEN: Volume 3, 1813–1814. $15.00. WEDLOCK'S THE DEVIL: Volume 4, 1814–1815. $16.50. SO LATE INTO THE NIGHT: Volume 5, 1816–1817. $15.00. THE FLESH IS FRAIL: Volume 6, 1818–1819. $15.00. BETWEEN TWO WORLDS: Volume 7, 1820. $15.00. BORN FOR OPPOSITION: Volume 8, 1821. $15.00. IN THE WIND'S EYE: Volume 9, 1821–1822. $15.00. A HEART FOR EVERY FATE: Volume 10, 1822–1823. $15.00. FOR FREEDOM'S BATTLE: Volume 11, 1823–1824. $15.00. (A twelfth volume, now in process, will contain a combined subject and general index for the eleven volumes.)

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handed Mr. Marchand's beautifully engineered editorial operation to make it unnecessary for a non-Byron-scholar like me to add mine; I should like instead to share my sense of the letters as expressions of the masterful personality of their author.

In a memorable stanza from "Stanzas from the Grand Chartreuse," Matthew Arnold cried out despairingly

> What helps it now, that Byron bore,
> With haughty scorn which mock'd the smart,
> Through Europe to the Aetolian shore
> The pageant of his bleeding heart?
> That thousands counted every groan,
> And Europe made his woe her own?

and had previously, in his "Memorial Verses," opined that "He taught us little; but our soul/ Had *felt* him like the thunder's roll." But the overwhelming portion of Byron's letters reveals something quite different from either a bleeding heart or the sound like thunder rolling; it is rather the cool, resourceful, absolutely secure voice of the confirmed sceptic that speaks. Reviewing the earliest volumes of the edition (*Listener,* 27 September, 1973) Christopher Ricks tellingly located the essence of Byron in his use of the word "but"—"In short, I deny nothing but doubt everything"—and his greatness to lie "in his various insistence upon the word and upon the thousand ways in which it is urgently apt." As Ricks nicely puts it, "But me no buts? But Byron seeks to but himself no end of buts." At that point Marchand's third volume hadn't appeared, but Ricks would have had a good time with the following sequence from a Byron escapade which began in September 1813 when he went down to Aston Hall in Rotherham to stay with a rather silly friend, James Wedderburn Webster, and his bride Lady Frances:

> The place is very well & quiet & the children only scream in a low voice—so that I am not much disturbed & shall stay a few days in tolerable repose.—W[ebster] don't want sense nor good nature but both are occasionally obscured by his suspicions & absurdities of all descriptions—he is passionately fond of having his wife admired—& all the time jealous to jaundice of every thing & every body—I have hit upon the medium of praising her to him perpetually behind her back—& never looking at her before his face—as for her I believe she is disposed to be very faithful—& I don't think any one now here is inclined to put her to the test.

But . . . a couple of weeks later something has happened:

> In these last few days I have had a good deal of conversation with an amiable person . . . well—these things are dull in detail—take

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> it once—I have made love—& if I am to believe mere *words* (for there we have hitherto stopped) it is returned.—I must tell you the place of declaration however—a billiard room!—I did not as C [Caroline Lamb] says "kneel in the middle of the room" but like Corporal Trim to the Nun "I made a speech."

Years later Byron referred to *Don Juan* as "a poetical *Tristram Shandy*," and here he was acting out his material in advance to Lady Melbourne, his main confidante in affairs of the heart. As he thinks about Wedderburn Webster's vanity, his chasing after other women and boasting about it, Byron finds that, really, Webster is to blame for the flirtation between himself and Lady Frances: "He must not be surprised if others admire that which he knows not how to value . . . Oons! who is this strange monopolist?" And as he may have remembered from writing it to Lady Melbourne a year previously about another woman, "She is very fond of her husband, which is all the better, as thus, if a woman is attached to her husband how much more will she naturally like one who is *not* her husband."

By November Lady Frances was writing intimately to Byron and he was delightedly sharing the correspondence with Lady Melbourne. Although the affair, it appears, was not consummated ("a fervent, but inconclusive passage," Peter Quennell has dubbed it), it hardly matters, since he had taken it to a high comic literary plane of pure, even disinterested contemplation. He is amused by "the simplicity of her cunning," and how she vindicates her "treachery" to Webster:

> Again—she desires me to write to *him kindly*—for—she believes he cares for nobody but *me!* besides—she will then hear *of* when she can't *from* me.—Is not all this a comedy?— . . . it has enlivened my ethical studies on the human mind beyond 50 volumes—how admirably we accommodate our reasons to our wishes!— — —She concludes by denominating that respectable man *"Argus"* a very irreverent appellation—if we can both hold out till Spring—perhaps he may have occasion for his Optics.—After all—"it is to deceive un Marito" does not this expression convey to you the strangest mixture of right & wrong?—a really guilty person could not have used it—or rather they would *but* in different words—I find she has not the *but* and that makes much difference—if you consider it—the experienced would have said it is "*only* deceiving *him*"—thinking of themselves—she makes a *merit* of it on his account & mine.

One couldn't ask for a more brilliant and concentrated example of Byron's vigorous detachment—vigorous because one feels him warming to the analysis as it proceeds, hardly able to believe what, through his own words, he is bringing forth from Lady Frances'. It

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anticipates nothing so much as the diligent ease of *Don Juan* at its best when it seems the opposite of anything made up in advance. The improvisatory elegance of this prose, its sparkle and high intelligence (surely the word is justified) are wonderful, especially when we remember that at the time Byron wrote it he was turning out (in the intervals of dressing for dinner, or undressing after a night out) things like "The Bride of Abydos" and "The Corsair," poems which not even T. S. Eliot's praise of their ingenuity in story-telling has made me read all the way through.

"Mad—bad—and dangerous to know," said Lady Caroline Lamb about him, in a feat of self-definition. But who can read, without wholly admiring it, the beginning and postcript from this letter to a woman (Henrietta D'Ussières) who persisted in writing the newly famous poet and eventually received a reply:

> Excepting your compliments (which are only excusable because you don't know me) you write like a clever woman for which reason I hope you *look* as unlike one as possible—I never knew but one of your country—Me. de Stael—[who had said Byron was "totally insensible to *la belle passion*"]—and she is as frightful as a precipice.—As it seems impracticable my visiting you—cannot you contrive to visit me? telling me the time previously that I may be in ye. way—and if this same interview leads to the "leap into the Serpentine" you mention—we can take the jump together—and shall be very good company—for I swim like a Duck—(one of the few things I can do well) and you say that your Sire taught you the same useful acquirement.

The postscript contains this: " 'Surprized' oh! no!—I am surprized at nothing—except at your taking so much trouble about one who is not worth it." Compare the overall friendly spirit of this (they never got together, in or out of the Serpentine) with Evelyn Waugh's equally splendid but rather less mannerly letter to the husband of a woman who had the nerve to write to him (Waugh told the husband he should restrain his wife from writing to strange men).

Of course Byron's reference to swimming, in the above paragraph, was in no way lightly made. We remember, and he informs his correspondents often in the early letters, that he swam the Hellespont (like a duck, doubtless) from Sestos to Abydos. As for making love, "It is true from early habit, one must make love mechanically as one swims, I was once very fond of both, but now as I never swim unless I tumble into the water, I don't make love till almost obliged" (this was only 1812, when he'd barely gotten started!). And to an English critic, reported by Byron's publisher John Murray to have objected to the mixture of humor and seriousness in *Don Juan*

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by stating that "We are never scorched and drenched at the same time," he replied

> Blessings on his experience! . . . Did he never spill a dish of tea over his testicles in handing a cup to his charmer, to the great shame of his nankeen breeches? Did he never swim in the sea at Noonday with the Sun in his eyes and on his head, which all the foam of Ocean could not cool? . . . Did he never inject for a Gonorrhea? Or make water through an ulcerated Urethra? Was he ever in a Turkish bath, that marble paradise of sherbet and sodomy?

This is undeniably the voice of experience. After all, he had years ago (1810) written home from a frigate in the Dardanelles, off Abydos, that "I see not much difference between ourselves & the Turks, save that we have foreskins and they have none, that they have long dresses and we short, and that we talk much and they little.—In England the vices in fashion are whoring and drinking, in Turkey, Sodomy & smoking, we prefer a girl and a bottle, they a pipe and pathic." There is something intensely life-giving and totally sane about these blends of feeling which scorch and drench us at the same time, as the comic spirit is wont to do. One thinks, to the later writer's disadvantage, of D. H. Lawrence's solemnities about how different from us were those natives south of the border—but then, Lawrence never got to Turkey.

Byron claimed that he revelled in contraries and self-contradiction. At one point in 1813, when he was keeping the journal he sporadically kept (these journals are of unfailing interest), he rather loudly welcomed the spirit of contradiction: "If I am sincere with myself (but I fear one lies more to one's self than to any one else), every page should confute, refute, and utterly abjure its predecessor." In fact, to a reader it feels more of a piece than that, though with plenty of variety in the poses he tries on to suit his inner weather. There is the man who knows all about women and affairs of the heart, and who knows why Lady Melbourne has remained his friend: "If she had been a few years younger, what a fool she would have made of me, had she thought it worth her while,—and I should have lost a valuable and most agreeable *friend.* Mem. a mistress never is nor can be a friend. While you agree, you are lovers; and, when it is over, any thing but friends"—a truth, I believe, which hasn't lost its freshness a century and a half later. There is the lover who tells his mistress in words what a bundle of marvelous contradictions she is: "I have always thought you the cleverest most agreeable, absurd, amiable, perplexing, dangerous fascinating little thing that lives now or ought to have lived 2000 years ago," he wrote Caroline Lamb in April 1812. Six months later, it was a new

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ballgame: "corrct yr. vanity which is ridiculous & proverbial, exert yr. Caprices on your new conquests & leave me in peace, yrs. Byron." A mistress never is nor can be a friend.

Or there is the literary critic who sees through everything, including Shakespeare: "[His] name, you may depend on it, stands absurdly too high and will go down. He took all his plots from old novels, and threw their stories into a dramatic shape . . . That he threw over whatever he did write some flashes of genius, nobody can deny: but this was all." So speaks the most un-Shakespearian user of language among the major English nineteenth-century poets, content to write off the master as merely a genius with words who was seriously deficient in executive skill. (Though Byron was not above quoting Coriolanus more than once—"There is a world elsewhere"—as he acted out the hero preparing to exile himself.) There is the satisfied lecher boasting a bit of his own executive skill with maidens of the south and telling his pal Hobhouse about what an agreeable life it is in hospitable Venice, if you can just manage to meet the right people:

> I asked Rizzo to introduce me—who declined . . . so I found a way by means of Soranzo another Venetian noble and friend of mine—and have fucked her twice a day for the last six—today is the seventh—but no Sabbath day—for we meet at Midnight at her Milliner's—She is the prettiest Bacchante in the world—& a piece to perish *in*. . . . I have a world of other harlotry—besides an offer of the daughter of the Arlechino of St. Luke's theatre—so that my hands are full— —whatever my Seminal vessels may be— With regard to Arpalice Teruceli (the Madcap above mentioned)—recollect there is no *liaison* only *fuff-fuff* and passades—& fair fucking.

(Mr. Marchand has not provided a footnote on "*fuff-fuff*," so we can assume he knows what it is, though I have had to use my imagination.) There's absolutely no doubt about it, Byron treated women as sexual objects rather than persons, and the annoying thing is he seems to have had pretty good luck with it, especially in Venice:

> You may suppose that in *two years*—with a large establishment—horses—houses—box at the opera—Gondola—journeys—women—and Charity—(for I have not laid out all upon my pleasures—but have bought occasionally a shillings-worth of Salvation) villas in the country—another carriage & horses purchased for the country—books bought &c. &c.—in short every thing I wanted—& *more* than I ought to have wanted—that the sum of five thousand pounds sterling is no great deal—particularly when I tell you that more than half was laid out on the Sex—to be sure I

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> have had plenty for the money—that's certain—I think at least two hundred of one sort or another—perhaps more—for I have not lately kept the recount.

No great deal, indeed no big deal, and one sympathizes with the difficulties of keeping count after the two hundred level is reached. What else can you do if your wife leaves you ("the Princess of Parallelograms" Byron more than once called Annabella Milbanke) but keep going somehow, in another country. There was certainly a world elsewhere. Tennyson, by contrast, after he went out into the woods and wrote "Byron is dead," decided it would be wisest to stay at home and keep house with Emily Sellwood.

The quoting of choice bits from these letters and journals, as I have been doing, may give the impression that reading them is one continuous pleasure; that however would be far from the case. I cannot begin to suggest the boredom induced by too many letters to Lady Melbourne complaining about Caroline Lamb, or the endless ones protesting Lady Byron's conduct in leaving him. From first to last the letters dealing with matters financial—most of them eventually written to Douglas Kinnaird, about the sale of Newstead Abbey or Rochdale, or the convenience of having more cash—are a trial. There is a great moment in the "London" cantos of *Don Juan* when Bryon disputes the truth of a line from his idol, Sir Walter Scott—"Love rules the Camp, the Court, the Grove"—by doubting that Love so rules:

> But if Love don't, *Cash* does, and Cash alone:
> Cash rules the Grove, and fells it too besides;
> Without cash, camps were thin, and courts were none;
> Without cash, Malthus tells you—"take no brides".

But I could not maintain the necessary interest in Byron's cash problems, as rendered in prose. There are also a great many letters making changes in poems he's submitted, only of interest to the Byron scholar. The letters (given both in the Italian and in translation) to his long-term last love, the Countess Teresa Guccioli, seemed to me a monotonously high profession of noble motives and feelings, humorless and yawn-provoking. And though it may just have been your reviewer running down, I found the late letters, particularly the ones written from Greece during the final adventure, not up to the standards set by Byron at his best.

On the other hand, the letters concerning other writers are fine indeed. Byron's tributes to Scott are handsome throughout, from his early ranking of that poet at the apex of a triangle, to his late, passionate defense of him to Stendhal. Speaking of a decision to use the heroic couplet for one of his own poems, he confesses that "Scott alone (he will excuse the Mr. 'we do not say Mr. Caesar')

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Scott alone of the present generation has hitherto completely triumphed over the fatal facility of octosyllabic verse—and this is not the least victory of his varied and mighty genius." Although he put Southey-Wordsworth-Coleridge near the base of his poetry triangle, just above "The Many," he also said about Wordsworth (while doubting that *The Excursion* could be fine as a whole) that "there can be no doubt of his powers to do about any thing." He patronized Keats unfailingly ("such writing is a sort of mental masturbation—he is always f——gg——g his *Imagination.*—I don't mean that he is *indecent* but vigorously soliciting his own ideas into a state which is neither poetry nor any thing else but a Bedlam vision produced by raw pork and opium." (Discuss, with reference to "Ode on Melancholy.") But his response to Keats's death was decent: "I am very sorry for it—though I think he took the wrong line as a poet," even though he didn't really believe the poet could have been done to death by the savage review of *Endymion.* He recalls an early savage review of himself by Jeffrey: "Instead of bursting a blood-vessel—I drank three bottles of claret—and began an answer." Along with the rapture he always directed at Pope, there is a nice appreciation of the greatness of the "Sporus" passage from the Arbuthnot epistle.

He is equally interesting about his own poetry. Of the many excellent nineteenth-century criticisms later to be made of it (those by Jeffrey, Hazlitt, Carlyle and Ruskin should be specially consulted) Swinburne's comparison of Byron's two long poems is outstanding:

> Much of the poet's earlier work is or seems unconsciously dishonest; [*Don Juan*] if not always or wholly unaffected, is as honest as the sunlight, as frank as the sea-wind. Here, and here alone the student of his work may recognise and enjoy the ebb and flow of actual life. . . . Here for the first time the style of Byron is beyond all praise or blame; a style at once swift and supple, light and strong, various and radiant. Between *Childe Harold* and *Don Juan* the same difference exists which a swimmer feels between lake-water and sea-water; the one is fluent, yielding, invariable; the other has in it a life and pulse, a sting and a swell, which touch and excite the nerves like fire or like music.

What would Byron have thought of Swinburne's late tour de force "A Swimmer's Dream"? He surely would have approved of the latter's distinction between the two long poems, since he himself wrote to Murray in 1820 that "a very pretty Italian lady" had complimented him on *Juan,* but also remarked upon its "drawbacks": "I answered that 'what she had said was true—but that I suspected it would live longer than Childe Harold.' —'Ah (but said she) I *would rather have the fame of Childe Harold for three years than an immortality of Don Juan!*' The truth is that it is *too true*—and the women hate

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every thing which strips off the tinsel of *Sentiment*—& they are right—or it would rob them of their weapons." And he was right; *Don Juan* has lasted, while *Childe Harold,* except for some of its "action" scenes, as of Waterloo in the third canto, is a series of frozen postures which lack the "life and pulse, sting and swell" Swinburne felt in the later poem. Byron had started out in *Don Juan* meaning to be "a little quietly facetious upon everything"; he believed, rightly about his own work at least, that "poetry is *generally* good—only by fits & starts—& you are lucky to get a sparkle here & there—you might as well want a Midnight *all stars*—as rhyme all perfect." So if but "one half of the two new Cantos be good in your opinion" he wrote to his publisher, "What the devil would you have more"? No more, is I think our answer; *Don Juan* is a wonderful poem to read all the way through (as I have finally done, after avoiding the middle cantos for years) or to read aloud from with a class at the end of a semester of high seriousness in Wordsworth, Shelley and Keats. The very best parts of the poem come at its beginning (the first three cantos) and toward the end with the London cantos. There the pure performance of the words sometimes dazzles, as in the marvelous "thieves language" stanza, which Eliot admired, about Juan killing the highwayman:

> He from the world had cut off a great man,
> Who in his time had made heroic bustle.
> Who in a row like Tom could lead the van,
> Booze in the ken, or at the spellken hustle?
> Who queer a flat? Who (spite of Bow-street's ban)
> On the high toby-spice so flash the muzzle?
> Who on a lark, with black eyed Sal (his blowing)
> So prime, so swell, so nutty, and so knowing?

(That last line especially brings tears of joy to the eyes.) But Eliot pointed out that Byron also had a real subject in those late cantos. When he wrote near the end of his life "that there is no society so intrinsically (though hypocritically) *intrigante* and profligate as English high life," he knew whereof he spoke. Yet the overall effect of the satire is more genial than that, and even in places sympathetic. Anything so solemn as "condemnation" just wasn't possible, given the necessary rhyming of the famous stanza.

"I should never have thought myself good for anything if I had not been detested by the English," he wrote Douglas Kinnaird, and concluded a paragraph with the promise that, "But Courage! I'll work them." He did, although a few places held out, like Westminster Abbey where (believe it or not) he had to wait until 1969 before they honored him with a plaque. But a better honor was the poem he wrote and entered as the last words in his final journal, and which editor Marchand prints at the front of the concluding vol-

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ume of letters: "On This Day I Complete My Thirty-Sixth Year," written at Missolonghi, Jan. 22, 1824. It begins with the lover's complaint:

'Tis time this heart should be unmoved,
  Since others it hath ceased to move:
Yet though I cannot be beloved,
  Still let me love!

then moves from despair at his days having fallen "in the yellow leaf," to one last self-arousal:

Awake (not Greece—she *is* awake!)
  Awake, my Spirit! think through *whom*
Thy life-blood tracks its parent lake
  And then strike home!

Tread those reviving passions down
  Unworthy Manhood—unto thee
Indifferent should the smile or frown
  Of Beauty be.

If thou regret'st thy Youth, *why live?*
  The land of honourable Death
Is here:—up to the Field, and give
  Away thy Breath!

Seek out—less often sought than found—
  A Soldier's Grave, for thee the best;
Then look around, and choose thy Ground,
  And take thy Rest:

He didn't find a Soldier's Grave; instead came a convulsion, leeches at his temples, endless bleeding by a parcel of doctors, until his breath was finally given away. But Life contradicts Art, just as he expected the pages of his journal to contradict each other. And this late little poem, which contradicts everything his Romantic contemporaries were showing about what could be done with language, is a fine one nonetheless. Of such surprises is the essential Byron, and this edition lets us see him plain.

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DANA GIOIA

Poetry Chronicle

MANY NEW BOOKS OF POETRY are interesting. Some are entertaining. A handful really memorable. But how rarely a new book comes along that is so exciting that it leaves one slightly dizzy. Nothing in Radcliffe Squires's first five books of poetry will have prepared readers for *Gardens of the World.*[1] Somehow at the age of sixty-three, long after the point when most writers settle in to comfortable repetition, this little-known poet has focused all of his talent into one stunning and original collection. Not that *Gardens of the World* is a perfect book. It contains some poems that seem stiff and mannered. But the good poems are so strong that one forgets these momentary lapses, and the best four or five poems rank, in my opinion, with any new American poems of the last ten years.

The first poem in the book, "One Day in Salamanca," lets the reader know this will be no ordinary collection. The poem describes a strange incident in a Salamanca café where a young beggar threatens to crush a captured sparrow unless an American tourist buys its freedom. Squires turns this anecdote into an amazing parable. The scene, the characters, the action are all brilliantly described. Most collections could not survive an opening this powerful. Everything else would seem anticlimactic. In *Gardens of the World* it sets a high standard that is matched many times. It also establishes the strange tone that dominates the book which unexpectedly shifts between gentleness and cruelty.

The poems that follow are mostly set in the dry, empty landscapes of the West. Born in Utah, Squires sees the plains and deserts with the unromantic eye of a native. He can masterfully recreate the exact look and feel of a place, but he is not content merely to describe. A landscape exists only insofar as someone sees it, and Squires's Western poems explore the relationship between the human viewer and the inhuman terrain. He understands how people cannot watch a place without somehow transforming it, however subtly, into subjective human terms. Squires's landscape poems are his most openly personal ones. By defining his relation to the natural world he defines himself. In "Chasms" the landscape becomes a symbol for human imperfection and mortality:

> I wonder why we come again and again
> To these places where footpaths suddenly end,

[1] GARDENS OF THE WORLD, by *Radcliffe Squires*. Louisiana State University Press. $4.95p.

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And beneath us lies a chasm. Sometimes it is
A sea like a vast grapevine
We watch, its veined, overlapping leaves
Shifting out of phase until they break at the horizon.
Sometimes we come to these great holes
In the desert where nothing shifts at all,
And, it seems, will never shift again and yet
Remains all unfinished. . . .

In passages like this one hears Squires's unmistakably personal voice. It is calm, insistent, and authoritative. The rhythms are strong but conversational, and no matter how complex the syntax one never loses track of the sense. Though there is often a subtle metrical system at work (the passage above is based on a four-stress line), one rarely notices it since the rhythms follow natural speech patterns so closely. Metaphors are used sparingly, but, when introduced, they are carefully placed and elaborated. One always has the sense of a single, insinuatingly familiar, and worldly voice behind the lines—the voice of an old man without illusions but still sensual and alert.

The last section of Squires's book is a series of nine interrelated poems each recreating a visit to a mythological garden. On the basis of these pieces alone I feel that Squires deserves consideration as one of the finest American poets writing today. They are overwhelming. Packed with so many arresting scenes, images, characters, and ideas, they are impossible to take in all at once. Reading them, one experiences a sense of excitement mixed with awe that one rarely gets with contemporary poetry. No, they are not quite a masterpiece. They have occasional flaws and miscalculations, and after a dozen readings, I am still not convinced that they form an integrated sequence. But at their best, as in "The Garden of Medusa" and "The Garden of Hecate," they are among the finest and most original new poems I have read in years.

Each of the Garden poems presents the end of a journey—a journey inward climaxing in a mysterious confrontation. The form of the poems is quasi-dramatic. Written in the present tense, they project the reader into the scene and force him through the action of the poem. While each garden is similar in that it becomes the scene of the action, each has an appearance and atmosphere different from the others. The Garden of Hecate, for example, is a quiet, untended spot haunted by an undefinably sinister force:

The gate is heavy and the hinge stubborn, but
It is not locked. Lean on it with all
Your being. It will give just enough
For you to enter and pass under the white poplar tree
From which albino worms descend on glittering threads . . .

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Each garden is not just a landscape but a troubling symbol for memory and imagination. If it can be visited, the arrival is not without risk. Squires explores the fine line between self-discovery and self-destruction. What one sees in the mirror may be more than one expects. The vision of one's destiny may be of death. And yet even death may become an alluring temptation, as in "The Garden of Medusa" where the dead champions, who have looked on the Gorgon's face, acquire a terrifying beauty:

> . . . where those who were turned
> To stone still stand. How beautifully they
> Have weathered. The grasp has run from the hands.
> Frail honeycomb of limestone shows in the hollowed
> Cheek. And the eyes, hardly eyes now,
> More nearly birds' eggs nested in stone, are all
> Turned calmly in the same direction. It is as if
> Sunlight had broken through the roof of the
> Underworld, and all the dead had forgotten
> Their living sins as wind and rain moved on them.
> You may, after all, choose to forget the mirror and
> See what the face really looks like.

These lush, mythical gardens stand in contrast to the dry, open landscapes of Squires's Western poems, and in some ways, they represent the two sides of his imagination—the visionary and the realistic, the Western American and the classicist. There is ultimately no dichotomy, however. Each type of poem makes the same journey in a different direction. The desert poems, which begin so realistically, typically end in a quiet visionary moment, just as the gardens for all their intricate fantasy often turn out to be inhabited by worldly individuals. As different as they seem on the surface, both types of poem confront the same question—how does man, who is created by history, escape from it? Squires has written critical studies of two American poets who have little in common except their position as dark, philosophic loners—Robert Frost and Robinson Jeffers—and he, too, shares their determined individuality. He is a philosophic poet who has no need for easy answers. And like Frost or Jeffers, he is complex without being difficult, serious without being pointlessly depressing. It has taken him a lifetime of experience and forty years of writing to translate his vision as successfully as in *Gardens of the World.* This is not a book to ignore.

Charles Tomlinson has probably learned more from America than any living British poet. As an undergraduate, he read Moore, Stevens, and Pound—hardly fashionable authors at Cambridge in the late 1940s—and became fascinated with their novel sense of poetic structure and style. Williams' influence came a little later, and Tomlinson soon adapted the three-part line and many of Williams'

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other rhythmic innovations into his own work. For most English poets American free verse is more dangerous than whisky. But Tomlinson managed to assimilate his modern masters without becoming imitative just as he has been able to write persuasively about so many foreign landscapes without seeming touristic. While many of his English contemporaries retreated to local themes and native traditions, he steadfastly looked abroad, first to America and then Europe and Japan. He is a post-modernist *par excellence*—deeply conscious of the international modern tradition but still deeply himself.

America's influence on Tomlinson has not only been literary. He has lived and travelled extensively in this country, and his books are full of poems which scrupulously recreate places in America most natives don't know. *The Flood*[2] alone contains poems about out-of-the-way cities like Jemez, Quarai, Cochiti, Cronkhite Beach, and Poolville as well as a few well-known ones like San Francisco and Albuquerque. When most Englishmen write about America, it ceases to be a real place and becomes a myth. Tomlinson never misses the reality. His poems vividly capture the presence of a place. American poets have been trying to write poems like "Mr. Brodsky" or "Arroyo Hondo" for years. Tomlinson seems to do it effortlessly.

The Flood marks no new breakthrough for Tomlinson. Rather it is a deepening of themes developed in his earlier books. Most of the poems describe the places one associates with the author—Italy, New Mexico, and Gloucestershire, where he now lives. Yet there is no sense of repetition. Though the places may by now be familiar, the inspiration behind the new poems is fresh and genuine. Tomlinson has often written about the coast of Italy, but "San Fruttuoso: the divers" is still a revelation. The author's eye for precise detail catches just those elements which made one day in that city unique.

Tomlinson is an artist as well as a poet, and his critics usually label him as a visual poet, one who uses close observation of the natural world as the basis of what one might literally call his artistic vision. Certainly Tomlinson has a sharp eye for images, but to consider him primarily a painter with words misses the most distinctive thing about his work—its sound. One can always recognize one of his poems (a hard claim to make for most English poets), whatever its subject, whether it is in free or formal verse. Even this unusual passage in couplets below has so many of the sounds one associates with him—the rapid pace, the continual spilling over of sentences from line to line, the nonchalant introduction of a foreign expression, the deft variation between groups of monosyllabic and polysyllabic words, the restless syntax that moves with his equally restless imagination:

> Are you the swift that dips here, or the course
> Of sheer, unimpeded water, the counterforce

[2] THE FLOOD, by *Charles Tomlinson*. Oxford University Press. $11.95.

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Of rock and stone? but images lie—
  Not the Ding-an-sich, but the light to see it by:
And no river could convey the artifice
  And no landscape either, the pulse of this:
A closer thing, it is as if thought might sing
  To the bloodbeat, set it racing:
"Programme Note"

The last four poems in the book describe the Severn river, which flows near Tomlinson's home in Gloucestershire, and a relentless winter storm that climaxed in a flood which overran his cottage. The title poem feverishly recounts the last nights before the home was flooded. Even as he frantically worked to divert the water, Tomlinson could not help being fascinated by the power of the river, and towards the end there is a wonderful moment when the poet comes downstairs the morning afterwards to view his ruined home:

. . . Full morning
Floated and raced with water through the house,
  Dancing in whorls on every ceiling
As I advanced. Sheer foolishness
  It seemed to pause and praise the shimmer
And yet I did and called you down
  To share this vertigo of sunbeams everywhere,
As if no surface were safe from swaying
  And the very stones were as malleable as clay.

I hope that Tomlinson will share more such "foolishness" with us in the future.

Along with *The Flood,* Tomlinson has also published an unusual bilingual book written in collaboration with the Mexican poet, Octavio Paz. *Airborn/Hijos del Aire*[3] consists of two short sequences of unrhymed sonnets each written around a central theme—"House" and "Day." The poets collaborated by writing alternate stanzas of each poem, Tomlinson in English, Paz in Spanish, which the other would then translate (thereby making the collaboration even more complex). Each sequence then ends with a poem written entirely by one poet (which, of course, is then immediately translated by the other). It all sounds like a lost novella by Nabokov, but the result is a remarkable little book.

Tomlinson and Paz are both fascinated with collaborative poetry, especially the linked verse of Japanese literature. (Their previous effort, *Renga,* in 1971, involved four poets working in four languages.) After reading *Renga,* I thought that such collaborations

[3] AIRBORN/HIJOS DEL AIRE, by *Octavio Paz* and *Charles Tomlinson.* Anvil Press Poetry. Distributed in the U.S. by SPD Inc. $3.95.

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were doomed to be interesting curiosities. Yet *Airborn* comes so close to success that I now believe it may be possible to bring off these Japanese forms in a contemporary Western context. The best poem in the book is the one written entirely by Paz, but many of the others do work well in a curious way. The act of reading this poetry is very different from reading traditional texts. Here one is always conscious of the transitions from one poet to the next. Will Paz be able to follow the challenge of Tomlinson's stanza? Will Tomlinson be able to develop the images of Paz's opening lines? One cannot read these poems without continually judging whether one poet has built successfully on what came before. It is exciting, exhausting reading that challenges one's notion of what a poem (and a translation) really is.

For example, Paz begins one poem in the "House" section with a complex stanza that simultaneously recalls his own childhood home, which no longer exists except in memory, and also suggests that the poems he is now writing have become a kind of shared imaginary home for the two poets:

> *House that memory makes out of itself*
> *between the spaces of blank time—more thought*
> *than lived and yet more said than thought,*
> *house that lasts as long as its own sound takes.*

In Tomlinson's continuation one can't help noticing how the imagery becomes more concrete, the idea of the house less Platonic and more Proustian:

> house, you began in milk, in warmth, in eating:
> words must retongue your first solidities
> and thought keep fresh your fragrance of bread baking
> or drown in the stagnation of its memories . . .

One could ask whether this is a continuation of Paz's opening or an entirely new poem. Something in between, the authors would probably reply, and, whatever that something is, it's worth looking into.

Anyone looking for an introduction to the new generation of British poets will want to pick up the latest volume of the Faber *Modern Poets* series. Rather than presenting a few poems each by a bewildering number of unfamiliar poets, the Faber series provides a representative selection of a few poets. Such an approach demands a careful editor, and Faber has been fortunate in choosing the novelist, Jim Hunter, for this five volume series. The Faber *Modern Poets* also includes brief biographies of each poet plus several pages of notes on the poems. Purists may flinch at the idea of notes attached to contemporary poems, but Americans, unfamiliar with British

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place names and the other local references which abound in contemporary British poetry, will find them indispensable. Hunter has also wisely placed the notes at the end of each section so that they don't interfere with the texts or needlessly distract the happy few who require no assistance.

Modern Poets Five[4] is most helpful for providing American readers a manageable introduction to the work of C. H. Sisson, one of the most influential and unusual poets in England today. Born in 1914, Sisson began writing late in life after a long career in Civil Service and has only become known in the last ten years. His rise to fame has been rapid, however, and his influence on young English poets considerable. Perhaps what the younger generation finds so appealing in him is exactly what may annoy most Americans—his strong traditional stand on issues. Sisson's views come right out of T. S. Eliot's famous pronouncement. He is a classicist in literature, a royalist in politics, and an Anglican in religion. It is not difficult to see how a young poet confronted by the social, religious, and economic chaos of the United Kingdom would find Sisson a reassuring figure of authority.

Sisson is an older man who has worked too long in politics to have any illusions about human nature, and his poetry reflects wisdom bitterly won through experience. Not superficially attractive, his work is hard-edged and occasionally quirky. But its intelligence and integrity make a lasting impression. Sisson is too complex and prolific a poet to be discussed here in any meaningful way, but the short poem "The Temple" shows some of the force that makes his best work so striking:

> Who are they talking to in the big temple?
> If there were a reply it would be a conversation:
> It is because there is none that they are fascinated.
> What does not reply is the answer to prayer.

Along with Sisson, *Modern Poets Five* contains a selection from five young poets from the United Kingdom—Andrew Waterman, Craig Raine, Robert Wells, Tom Paulin, and Andrew Motion. Once again Mr. Hunter should be congratulated because all of these poets are worth reading (a statement one certainly cannot make about most anthologies of young poets). Paulin, an Englishman raised in Belfast, seems the strongest of the group. His work is political without ceasing to be deeply human. He can write angrily about the Ulster violence in one poem and then write gently about a coast guard's widow in the next. Why his work is not better known in America is a mystery to me. Andrew Motion, still in his twenties, lacks Paulin's complexity and power, but he still has written a few poems that de-

[4] MODERN POETS FIVE, ed. by *Jim Hunter*. Faber & Faber. $8.95p.

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serve an audience on this side of the Atlantic. His "Anniversaries" and "Before Company," which deal with his mother who spent the last years of her life paralyzed from a riding accident, are superbly done and deeply moving. Using an insistent rhythm and hidden rhymes Motion builds up to a shattering climax:

What spellbound country

claimed you, forbidding you
even to wake for a kiss?
If it was death,
whose hands were those

warm in my own, and whose
astonishing word was it
that day when leaving
your sunlit room I heard

"Stay; stay" and watched
your eyes flick open once,
look, refuse to recognize
my own, and turn away?

Robert Wells also makes a strong impression. He is an extremely accomplished poet, though one feels his best work is yet to be written. His characteristic form is the short lyric, and his highly-polished, often formal work tries hard to objectify experience. His poems are clear but often deliberately hide the emotional events which triggered them. The cold precision of the rhyme and metre, however, cannot totally hold the underlying passion in place. His best work is charged with a suppressed eroticism so strong that even virginity, which "glittered with the impulse that it stayed," becomes powerfully sexual. Water and thirst also become sexual metaphors and, in those few moments where he becomes openly personal, he can use them skillfully to introduce his real subject indirectly. "Fantasy" is only eight lines long, and yet what tension it builds until its final confession:

We would have trembled with the secrecy of the place
As if, thirsty, we could hear the noise of water
With nothing to hinder our kneeling there to drink;
And have walked, the bracken reaching above our waists,
Some dog-rose petals cast large and white
Across the brittle remnant about our feet
Of last year's stems. Where the deer's hoof pushed at the soil,
We would have lain, with only the sky to know.

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A few people admire the work of John Ashbery tremendously. A few others dislike it with equal conviction. Most poetry readers simply declare themselves incompetent to judge it. This is an unusual situation, to say the least. As with New Year's intentions, everyone seems to have tried Ashbery and quickly given up—not with spite or disdain, just confusion. They admit that there is talent there but don't know what to make of it.

Shadow Train[5] will change no one's mind about Ashbery's merits as a poet. His admirers will praise the new-found discipline and concentration in this collection of sixteen-line, "sonnet-like" poems. His detractors will grumble about the emperor's new briefs. And the rest will continue to play Pontius Pilate washing their hands of the whole matter. Yet *Shadow Train* is an interesting book that can give a careful reader a new understanding of Ashbery's strengths and weaknesses as a poet.

Part of the pleasure of reading Ashbery comes from the variety of words, images, moods, and styles he can fit so seamlessly into his work. He continually surprises one with things not usually found in a poem. *Shadow Train* encompasses everything from Warren G. Harding to the Keystone Kops, from the idea of God to the "Image of the Little Match Girl." He can move convincingly from pathos to low humor in the same stanza or turn a piece of slang into a remarkable metaphor. Yet sometimes this diversity works against him. He often indulges in gross sentimentality, and though he tries to distance it with an ironic title, as in "Some Old Tires," the burden of his clichés sometimes sinks the entire poem:

> This was mine, and I let it slip through my fingers.
> Nevertheless, I do not want, in this airy and pleasant city,
> To be held back by valors that were mine
> Only the space of a dream instant . . .

It takes more than irony to save this sort of writing, but these obvious lapses are rare. Ashbery's pervasive sentimentality is usually better balanced by flashes of wit or at least the pleasant chiaroscuro of deliberate ambiguity. Even in "Some Old Tires" he later partially redeems himself with lines like ". . . To have always/Had the wind for a friend is no recommendation." Or elsewhere he cleverly describes "angels elbowing each other on the head of a pin." His usual style is nostalgic but in a suave and worldly way—the tone of a man who has seen it all stoically looking back on life.

> Another season, proposing a name and a distant resolution.
> And, like the wind, all attention. Those thirsting ears,

[5] SHADOW TRAIN, by *John Ashbery*. Viking Penguin. $8.95; $4.95.

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Climbers on what rickety heights, have swept you
All alone into their confession, for it is as alone

Each of us stands and surveys this empty cell of time . . .
"The Ivory Tower"

As *Shadow Train* demonstrates, Ashbery still has a good ear for spoken language. While there is not much traditional music in his recent poetry, it bristles with striking lines and phrases. This gift for felicitous, natural phrasing is the key to Ashbery's unique sound. Whereas most poets use the stressed word or the metrical foot for their rhythmic unit, Ashbery uses the larger unit of the phrase. This choice gives his verse its speed and distinctively supple rhythms. This practice also has its dangers. In his longer poems it can allow Ashbery's complex syntax to run away with him. The self-imposed limits of *Shadow Train* (fifty short poems of identical length) keep Ashbery from spinning the elegant camouflauge that typifies his longer work. Here one can see how Ashbery's imagination works. Since the poems are short enough to be seen as a whole, their underlying structure, usually so elusive, becomes clearer than before. The abrupt transitions from scene to scene, image to image, are now easier to follow. They may still seem arbitrary, but at least now one can hold both unrelated parts in mind for comparison.

Shadow Train therefore shows the same Ashbery as *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror* or *Houseboat Days* but in a form which is easier to grasp. He is still not a poet one would recommend without reservations, but at least this volume provides a manageable introduction to his prolific and difficult work. If one is prepared to approach him uncritically, he is very entertaining, but his work must not be read so much as overheard—like an attractive voice talking at another table. Under scrutiny, however, his graceful elegant poems often seem arbitrary and overlong. Their unity is mainly stylistic. Their meaning is in their method.

Ashbery is a discursive poet without a subject. Although he deals indirectly with several recurrent themes, themes which have become increasingly dark and personal as he has grown older, the poems are mainly the surface play of words and images. One never remembers ideas from an Ashbery poem, one recalls the tones and textures. If ideas are dealt with at all, they are present only as faint echoes heard remotely in some turn of phrase. Ideas in Ashbery are like the melodies in some jazz improvisation where the musicians have left out the original tune to avoid paying royalties. They are wild variations on a missing theme with only the original chord changes as a clue. This sort of music can be fun as long as someone doesn't try to analyze it like a Beethoven symphony. A skillful and sympathetic critic like Helen Vendler can trace major themes in Ashbery, but somehow in reading him, even repeatedly, one does

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not see the deeper side of his work emerge so satisfactorily. Despite the awards and attention, he lacks the weight of the major poet his defenders claim he has become. Paradoxically his work becomes more pleasurable and interesting the less claims one makes for him. He is a marvellous minor poet, but an uncomfortable major one.

Michael Van Walleghen's first book, *The Witchita Poems* (1975), was an unusually fine debut that left one with great expectations. Its best poems like "The Revolt of the Snowmen" and "The Permanence of Witches" spoke with an eerie authority that immediately commanded the reader's attention. Now Van Walleghen's slender second collection, *More Trouble with the Obvious,*[6] has appeared, and although it comes with the imprint of the 1980 Lamont Poetry Prize, it seems in comparison a disappointing performance.

Not that *More Trouble with the Obvious* is a poor book. It is engaging and entertaining throughout. Van Walleghen's poetic gifts are all intact. His gift for metaphors and similes is still striking. He can construct poems naturally out of images without sounding forced. His ear for free verse is still fresh and unaffected. But somehow these gifts don't come together as effectively now as they did in his first book. The poems seem written at a lower intensity. They have many wonderful moments, but too often, just as the poems start to tighten up into something first-rate, they meander. This passage from "Rancho Linda Vista," for example, captures the eerie feel of an abandoned ranch but is marred by an odd digression that undercuts its superb beginning:

> That peculiar ambience
> in which a future bangs around
>
> like an old windmill
> and says *goodbye, goodbye*
>
> all day. An atmosphere
> redolent of old ladies
>
> who can't speak English
> talking to the ants
>
> shouting at the airplanes
> Cancer. Dogshit. The bullsnake
>
> climbing up the drainpipe . . .

This lack of intensity is also found in the prose poems which make up about half of the volume. "Prose poem" is probably the

[6] MORE TROUBLE WITH THE OBVIOUS, by *Michael Van Walleghen.* University of Illinois Press. $10.00; $4.95.

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vaguest term in critical parlance, and, to judge by current usage, it could refer with equal validity to anything from Breton's automatic writing to the short stories of O. Henry. Van Walleghen writes two very different kinds of prose poem. One is a short, fanciful narrative somewhat like an absurdist parable. The other is a compressed, imagistic piece that usually describes a place or scene. The trouble is that Van Walleghen does not do each kind equally well. His parables are often strained, self-conscious, and derivative with a "Kafka Goes Midwestern" feel. Their simplicity and quirky humor may go over big at poetry readings, but they do not wear well on the page. The more descriptive and imagistic pieces like "Driving into Enid" or "Do Not Dump Dead Animals" work much better. Here Van Walleghen is writing real poems that just happen to be in prose. Unfortunately they do not make up the majority. Yet, despite these complaints, I enjoyed *More Trouble with the Obvious*. Van Walleghen has a good ear and a fresh imagination. It's only that his best poems like "The Escape Artist" keep reminding me that the others should be better. I hope he has less trouble focusing his obvious talents in the next collection.

J. D. McClatchy's *Scenes from Another Life*[7] is a difficult but rewarding first book of poems. There is a sense of precision pervading everything in this volume from the careful arrangement of the poems to the quality of perception in each line. Every element has been thought over and refined by a formidable intelligence.

McClatchy is a reflective poet. His poems are urbane but serious meditations on the relationship between the worlds of the imagination and the senses. If his overt subjects sometimes seem trivial or contrived—breakfast china, a cottage garden, classical ruins, a foreign poem—it is because he must distance himself from the painfully personal underlying themes he discusses. Even the title of the book reflects this intentional alienation. The other life he presents is unquestionably his own, but he has translated it from the impermanence of daily living into the timelessness of art.

A paradox of translation is that one must often change the literal sense of an original to capture its real meaning, and McClatchy is quick to confess that his transposition of experience into words has required distortion and revision. Like his alter ego in "The Immoralist in Cairo," McClatchy has written the "careful history of likely events / that had not occurred." But his elaborate inventions, so cunningly staged and carefully rehearsed, do not keep one from noticing that the substance of the drama remains unmistakably personal. *Scenes from Another Life* is ultimately a book of love poems—not in the old-fashioned sense of romantic thoughts addressed to the beloved, but rather a quietly passionate attempt to open his inner life to another individual.

What makes *Scenes from Another Life* a rewarding book is

[7] SCENES FROM ANOTHER LIFE, by *J. D. McClatchy*. George Braziller. $4.95p.

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McClatchy's successful translation of his intelligence into words. There is a rare quality of language in his best poems, which, as Robert Penn Warren points out on the back cover, uses wit "as a way of perception." When McClatchy begins a poem with a play on Virgil's famous phrase and writes "Tiers of things," he has things both ways. He not only uses a brilliant pun to describe the arrangement of china on a breakfast table, he also brings off the joke without losing the sense of underlying sadness in the allusion. "*Lacrymae rerum*" might even serve as a motto to McClatchy's restrained work. There is a sadness in the book, but it is shown indirectly through objects rather than by breastbeating on the part of the poet.

There are dangers, though, in McClatchy's method. The careful observations, the calculated wordplay, and thick texture can smother a poem of middling inspiration. Likewise his characteristic evasiveness does make some poems difficult to penetrate. Yet it is hard to criticize these aspects of his style, when they are also the qualities that shape his best work. His development as a poet may depend, however, on balancing wit and emotion, confession and evasion.

My favorite poem in the volume is "Serenade," a delicate query that puzzles out the shifting relationship between one's self and the person one loves. "Am I beside myself?" McClatchy asks midway—another pun that does not distract the reader but rather focuses him on exactly the right aspects of the poem. It begins:

> Fine breakers of day splash against the shutter,
> But to us, here on the safe side of a false dusk,
> Only sounds stream in from the homebound pageant.
> All the dry clarity of features is gone, even
> That crisis a close regard seems to provoke
> From readings of your face, whose lines
> I've invented histories for, their causes just
> Odd effects of either eye. Heart-shaped
> Chin, dumb-show brow, the balance between—now
> Pure form, silhouette on a paler ground
> Of linen. Am I beside myself? Or is this
> The loss echoed in sudden discoveries
> Of my debt to shapes I find myself assuming?

There is no intrinsic value in reflective poetry. Who would want a meticulous recreation of a bookkeeper's inner life, no matter how accurate it might be? Introspective poetry is only as interesting as the mind it looks into. *Scenes from Another Life* shows a mind and imagination worth lingering in.

Occasionally an author writes one book so good that it overshadows all of her other work. This has been the fate of Janet Lewis whose unforgettable short novel, *The Wife of Martin Guerre,* has stayed in print for over forty years and gradually acquired the status of a minor modern classic. Lewis began her career as a poet,

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however, and has recently devoted herself entirely to verse. With her poetry out of print it has been almost impossible for the average reader to assess this side of her career. Now as a belated tribute to her eightieth birthday three different publishers have issued books of Lewis' work, each highlighting a different facet of her long career.

Poems Old and New: 1918–1978[8] collects all of Lewis' work to date. "Old and new" are not just used figuratively here. These poems span sixty years of writing from the author's first book in 1922 which appeared in a series that included Marianne Moore and William Carlos Williams, to a pamphlet published just three years ago. "Old" refers to the work written before 1944 when Lewis gave up poetry for fiction; "new" to the work published since her return to poetry in the seventies. Over the years Lewis' poetry has fallen into three distinct phases. First there is the imagist work of her early career. Then comes a phase of formal lyrics much influenced by the poetry of her husband, the late Yvor Winters. And finally the more open forms of her recent poetry. There are some attractive pieces in the middle period, but it is the early and late work which makes Lewis an interesting poet.

The poems from Lewis' first book, *The Indians in the Woods,* are included in her collected volume, but this short sequence has also been reprinted in a handsome, new edition by Matrix Press,[9] that presents these remarkable poems as a self-contained work for the first time since their initial appearance in 1923. Although unmentioned in most accounts of Imagism, *The Indians in The Woods* is an important document of that period, not only because of its intrinsic quality but also for the interesting link it makes between Imagism and native American verse. These fifteen poems inspired by the legends of the Ojibway still seem fresh and lively. The polymorphous presence of Manibozho, the Ojibway trickster God, who holds the sequence together, more often seems like a figure from the seventies than the twenties. Lewis never did finer or more individual work than in this early volume. Although one sees the influence of Imagism, one already hears Lewis' own voice in every poem.

This characteristic voice is quiet and controlled. Whether she writes about domestic affairs or the natural world, she balances close observation with a metaphysical curiosity. In "Fossil, 1975" (cleverly juxtaposed in the volume next to a similar poem she wrote in 1919!) she speculates on the paradox of a fossilized fern:

> Changed and not changed. Three million years.
> This sunlight-summoned little fern

[8] POEMS OLD AND NEW, 1918–1978, by *Janet Lewis.* Ohio University Press/Swallow Press. $14.95; $7.95.

[9] THE INDIANS IN THE WOODS, by *Janet Lewis.* Matrix Press. $5.00p.

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Closed in a cenotaph of silt
Lies in my hand, secret and safe.
In quiet dark transformed to stone,
Cell after cell to crystal grown,
The pattern stays, the substance gone . . .

In recent years Lewis has become increasingly interested in writing words for music. Her *Poems Old and New* ends with several songs and the text for a choral piece. She turned *The Wife of Martin Guerre* into a libretto for William Bergsma and adapted *The Last of the Mohicans* for Alva Henderson. Now Symposium Press has produced an elegant limited edition of Lewis' most recent libretto, *The Birthday of the Infanta,*[10] which she wrote with the composer, Malcolm Seagrave. Lewis brings off the operatic elements in Wilde's fairy tale so successfully that it seems as if it were originally conceived for the stage.

Anyone who has crossed the Tiber from central Rome into Trastevere has probably seen a statue that seems to stand guard at the entrance of the district. It is of a seated man in a top hat and cloak and bears the enviable inscription:

To Their Poet
G. G. Belli
The People of Rome

Giuseppe Gioachino Belli (1791–1863) is a unique figure in Italian literature. Joyce and Sainte-Beuve praised him. Lawrence and Gogol wanted to translate him. Anthony Burgess made him protagonist of the novel, *ABBA ABBA*. Belli was the greatest Roman satirist since Juvenal. His vast work captured every aspect of Roman life from the Papacy to the police, from the booksellers to the bordellos. He is the definitive author of Rome, a comic genius, like Joyce with Dublin, whose work embraced a great modern city and its people. And yet Belli, a poet of European stature, remains little read, even in Italy. The reason for his obscurity is obvious—his language. His 2200 sonnets are not written in standard literary Italian but in Romanesco, the Roman dialect. By writing in Romanesco, Belli effectively limited his audience to the citizens of one city.

The Sonnets of Giuseppe Belli[11] translated by Miller Williams provides American readers with the largest selection of Belli's work to date and the only version with facing Romanesco texts. The format is commendable. I only wish I could recommend Williams' translations with equal enthusiasm. They are not bad, just lackluster. He successfully translates Belli's colloquial Romanesco into spoken

[10] THE BIRTHDAY OF THE INFANTA, by *Janet Lewis*. Symposium Press. $25.00.

[11] THE SONNETS OF GIUSEPPE BELLI, trans. by *Miller Williams*. Louisiana State University Press. $17.50.

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American, but the bite of the originals is gone. He retains rhyme for the sonnets but handles it so loosely that "soul" and "know," "little" and "paddle" both rhyme. The rhythm of either Italian or English sonnets is gone entirely. What takes its place is a "five stress" line, scanned by a system known only to himself. Sometimes the resulting translations work, but usually a very lax English poem appears in the place of a tight original. Williams' translations are no worse than the standard versions of Rilke or Baudelaire but like them are hardly definitive. Perhaps Belli is one of those poets who can never be brought completely into English. It is not only a problem of capturing the flavor of the Roman dialect. There is also no comparable tradition of satiric sonnets to provide the English translator with a suitable model.

The best versions of Belli in English are still the seventy-one sonnets that Burgess attached as an appendix to *ABBA ABBA*. They are sometimes wild, but they capture Belli's brilliant satiric tone. Compare the opening stanza of Belli's famous "Er Giorno der Giudizzio," a half irreverent half serious vision of the Judgment Day, in two versions. First Williams':

> Each of four huge angels wraps his mouth
> Around a trumpet and then he begins to blow,
> One to the north, the east, the west, the south;
> A voice says, "Step right up." First thing you know . . .

Now Burgess' (yes, it is a translation of the same poem):

> At the round earth's imagined corners let
> Angels regale us with a brass quartet,
> Capping that concord with a fourfold shout:
> "Out everybody, everybody out!"

Burgess' version has wit and verve to it. He has translated Belli into poetry and caught the brusque apocalyptic humor of the original. Williams' is clear but unexceptional. Strangely enough, though Burgess changes the rhyme scheme and quotes John Donne, his version is not much further from the Italian than Williams', which considerably changes one line as well as misses the witty closure of the original stanza. Why translate Belli into English sonnets if one doesn't use the form to advantage? Belli enthusiasts will want this new book, but others are advised to go elsewhere—or pray that Giacomo Joyce will quickly dictate his versions to us from the Great Beyond *via* James Merrill's ouija board.

One closing note. Proofreading has declined to such a state that now not even dust-jackets are safe. A passage from one Belli sonnet quoted on the dustjacket appears not as six lines of verse but as two paragraphs of prose. Shoddy work for a university press as good as Louisiana and further proof, as if anyone needed it, that we do live in an age of prose.

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MICHAEL GORRA

The Modesty of Anthony Powell

THESE VOLUMES[1] CONFIRM what one has always suspected: that Powell's sensibility and that given to Nicholas Jenkins, the narrator of his twelve-volume novel, *A Dance to the Music of Time*, are virtually indistinguishable. This similarity becomes evident in looking at the attitude struck by either Powell or his character toward his own gaffes. Take, for example, this passage from *The Kindly Ones*, the *Dance*'s sixth part, in which Jenkins says, about a question asked of his father's soldier-servant, Bracey, that:

> I can see now, looking back, that the question was hopelessly, criminally, lacking in tact on my own part. I knew perfectly well that Bracey and Albert did not get on well together, that they differed never more absolutely than on this particular issue. I had often, as I have said, heard my parents speak of the delicacy of the Albert-Bracey mutual relationship. There was really no excuse for asking something so stupid, a question to which, in any case, I had frequently heard the answer from other sources.

—this self-recrimination stemming from a question about the disposition of a piece of stale cake. Look now at a sketch of Maurice Bowra in *Infants of the Spring*:

> One evening, dining tête-à-tête with Bowra in his rooms, I spoke of how little I liked being at Oxford, and how I longed to get it over and go down. The lack of finesse in voicing such sentiments in the particular circumstances was, of course, altogether inexcusable . . . One learns in due course (without ever achieving the aim in practice) that, more often than not, it is better to keep deeply felt views about oneself to oneself. In any case a little good sense—a little good manners even—might have warned me that such a confession was not one to make to a slightly older friend, who, even then, was rapidly becoming one of the ever brightening stars of the Oxford firmament.

A question about stale cake, or a statement about unhappiness at university, would cause no problems in most company. Jenkins' words, however, lead to one of Bracey's periodic "bad days"; Pow-

[1] TO KEEP THE BALL ROLLING: The Memoirs of Anthony Powell. Holt, Rinehart and Winston. VOLUME ONE: Infants of the Spring. $10.95. VOLUME TWO: Messengers of the Day. $10.95. VOLUME THREE: Faces in My Time. $14.95.

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ell's with Bowra, to a cooling of their friendship. The mistake lies not in what is said, but to whom it is said, in a "lack of finesse," a failure to consider precisely to whom one is speaking, and to weigh one's words accordingly; small instances of what will become the major sin in the *Dance*.

I pause at the second of these quotations, at the idea of Powell unburdening himself to anyone. Certainly he does not often allow Jenkins to indulge himself in that, in particular with regard to his marriage. Powell shares that reticence to such a degree that he offers no reason beyond the possibility of embarrassment for his casual statement about those "deeply felt views." Given that statement, one might wonder that he has been able to commit an act of autobiography. But in fact he has not. These three books, dealing with Powell's life up to 1951, when he published *A Question of Upbringing*, the *Dance*'s first part, are carefully labelled "memoirs"; the generic distinction is important. Autobiographies trumpet the self, concern themselves with the fashioning of a consciousness, an "I" to which the external world is subordinated. Memoirs, however, look outward, dealing not so much with their "I" as with the world in which he lives. A writer of memoirs includes some stories not because they are important in terms of his development, but because they are amusing, or suggestive of the period—Powell's account of Rosa Lewis and the Cavendish Hotel, for example, fills a disproportionate amount of *Messengers of Day*, given their minute place in the scheme of his life. Above all, memoirs deal in a wealth of social and historical detail, such as the fact that Powell was born in a flat "rented for the occasion." Autobiographies are always ambitious in intention and appearance; memoirs, however grandly conceived, have the appearance of modesty in two senses of the word. First, in that they seem to make no claim for themselves other than to tell a few anecdotes about one's life and times. Second, because their focus upon the external world provides the opportunity for self-effacement. The achievement of a memoir need not, however, be modest—it can achieve more to the degree that it finds a subject which allows it to be something other than a string of loosely connected stories.

In practice, the two forms are almost always mixed, as in Yeats's *Autobiography*. *To Keep the Ball Rolling*, however, provides as pure an example as I know of memoir, books in which Powell follows his own advice about confession nearly without exception. The basic facts are of course all there, most of them corresponding to the outline of the life Powell has given to Jenkins: born in 1905, his father an army officer, educated at Eton, then Balliol. *Messengers of Day* covers his life in London after leaving Oxford—working for Duckworth's, the publishers, and then the start of his career as a novelist, with *Afternoon Men* in 1931. *Faces in My Time* begins with his marriage to Lady Violet Pakenham in 1934, and then moves through the war, ending with his plans for the *Dance*. Beyond that, Powell says little about his writing, except to bemoan attempts at an identi-

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fication of his friends and relatives with his characters; still less about his emotional life as a young man, except to hint that he had one and that it's not particularly interesting.

Self-revelation enters indirectly when it does at all, stray sentences in a description of someone else. Powell writes, for example, that he was not sure he would accept an invitation to meet George Orwell, because "I was at first unwilling to involve myself in so much frugal living and high thinking." But he does accept, and Orwell immediately defuses his expectations by asking a rather dandyish question about the fine points of military uniforms, so beginning a friendship that forms the basis for these memoirs' best pages. My point about Powell's statement, however, is that his reticence can't be confused with personal austerity. Since he rarely mentions what he does—observation aside—at the parties described either in his novel or his memoirs, it's hard at first to realize that Powell is not just a connoisseur of raffish characters, but a bit of one himself, drawn to the "seedy chic" of the demi-monde by something more than voyeurism.

Yet it would be equally wrong to mistake that raffishness for a mannered frivolity. This time the clue lies in a description of the composer Constant Lambert:

> . . . Lambert's general approach to the arts . . . was in such contrast with that of my Oxford generation. With them there seemed always an amateurishness, a narrowness of view, a way of treating the arts as if they were a useful social weapon. Again explanation eludes me, because several of my Oxford contemporaries were gifted enough. The crux was perhaps that the people I knew at Oxford who practised the arts did so with a self-consciousness of which Lambert . . . was totally free.

So much for Powell's attitude toward his much-discussed generation, Martin Green's *Sonnenkinder*, some of whom—Harold Acton, Brian Howard, Robert Byron—Powell first knew in the Eton Society of the Arts. Powell's interest lies in the arts themselves rather than in being "artsy." One need not live frugally. A fastidious reluctance to use one's habits, tastes, and talents as social weapons, vulgar tools with which to provoke or offend, will be enough. As with so much else in Powell, it is a matter of taste.

Modesty too is a matter of taste, and for Powell a virtue. In these books he has seized the appearance of modesty that memoir affords—its self-effacement, its air of conversation. *A Dance to the Music of Time* also has that feel of memoir. Yet in its scope the novel is anything but the product of modest ambitions, nor is the final integration of its anecdotes a modest achievement. That integration takes place through Jenkins' imposition of a controlling metaphor upon his experience, and in the style through which he observes and comprehends that experience. The standard comparisons are with Proust and Waugh, the first because the *Dance* takes the form

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of memory, the second because Powell and Waugh were friends, and because much of the *Dance* takes place, like Waugh's novels, at parties and in country houses. Both comparisons strike me as inappropriate. Powell is not interested in memory for its own sake, and he does not turn his London into Waugh's Metroland. A more fruitful comparison is with Meredith. Both novelists set their work within a system, a frame to which action within the novel can be referred; in Meredith's case, his ideas about Comedy; in Powell's, the conception of the Dance. Both view the incidents they describe as essentially funny. Meredith reduces his characters to counters in some grand game, with which to illustrate, albeit ironically, the aphorisms with which his novels are studded. Powell's comedy works by regarding his characters not as counters or things, but as individuals, in accordance with Nietzsche's observation, quoted in *Faces in My Time,* that "the individual when closely examined is always comic."

Jenkins' description of his Uncle Giles in *A Question of Upbringing* provides a model for this attitude:

> . . . Uncle Giles had been relegated by most of the people who knew him at all well to that limbo where nothing is expected of a person, and where more than usually outrageous actions are approached, at least conversationally, as if they constituted a series of practical jokes, more or less enjoyable, according as to where responsibility for clearing up matters might fall. The curious thing about persons regarding whom society has taken this largely self-defensive measure is that the existence of the individual himself reaches a pitch where nothing he does can ever be accepted as serious.

Jenkins expects nothing of Powell's other characters in both senses of the phrase: he finds their actions random, unpredictable, but also has no faith that those actions will ever take an unambiguously positive turn. This results in a sense of comic resignation similar to that of Meredith's narrators, in which laughter lies not so much in the practical jokes of daily life themselves—the tennis match between Messieurs Orn and Lundquist in *A Question of Upbringing* is a good example—as in Jenkins' *post facto* comprehension of an incident, his way of treating all characters as if they were Uncle Giles. In *A Buyer's Market,* however, Nick wonders, "Was it possible to take Uncle Giles seriously? And yet he was, no doubt, serious enough to himself." That realization forces Powell to substitute sympathy for Meredith's derision. Jenkins never loses his sense of detached amusement at the other characters' grotesqueries, but combines that with an attempt to understand their motivations and self-conceptions, to take all circumstances into account.

Yet in expecting nothing of those around him, Jenkins above all does not expect them to share his style of perception. He blames his own lack of understanding for Bracey's "bad day," rather than expecting the soldier to realize that the question has been asked by a

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nine-year-old boy, whose naivete may be exused. Jenkins' style, because it expects nothing, not of himself but for himself, is an act of pure generosity. This suggests another comparison—the Jean Renoir of *The Rules of the Game*, to which Powell's early novel *From a View to a Death* (1933) bears a surface resemblance, although its poker-faced narration lacks the movie's, or the *Dance*'s warmth. This generosity requires that both Powell and Jenkins refuse to speak with authority about others, about the ways in which Uncle Giles may be serious to himself. Hence the clouds of speculation, of circumstances taken into account, which are responsible for the *Dance*'s peculiar flavor, but also for its main weakness, the way in which, as James Tucker says, "Jokes may be stilted by their own fat."[2]

Yet if Powell will not impose a meaning or judgment upon individual action, he will—almost in compensation—impose a principle of order upon experience in its larger, external motions. And that principle, the Dance, is not simply a comic one. At Eton, Powell was considered moody; the action of his novel possesses an air of somber inevitability, of melancholia—something brought home by the quotation from Robert Burton with which the whole sequence concludes. Isn't the fact that the closely examined individual is always comic essentially a sad one, a suggestion of human limitation and frailty more than anything else? The conclusion to Meredith's *The Egoist* leaves me drained, disturbed, confused; similarly the end of *A Dance to the Music of Time*.

Yet hopeful as well. That sense grows from Nick's style, which I find both valuable and wise. Kenneth Widmerpool, with whose death in *Hearing Secret Harmonies* the novel ends, is commonly taken to be the Dance's focus. Yet though the novel is built around him, it is not about him. He is an organizing principle, a means, not an end, and serves primarily to establish a system of judgment within the novel. For Widmerpool, sweeping all before his insistent I, before his will to dominate, ignores precisely what one finds in Nicholas Jenkins—the willingness, the understanding, required to see things as being more complex than one can fully understand. And that failure on Widmerpool's part makes us value Nick's style, turns it into the novel's final good, a process delicately realized largely because Nick never takes an explicit stand against Widmerpool, never blames him for what he cannot help, for being, even more than Uncle Giles, a man from whom nothing can be expected. *A Dance to the Music of Time* is finally a quiet affirmation of the value of Nick's, or Powell's, style. This is not a modest claim for him to make; neither, I think, is it a false one.

His three volumes of memoirs, however, persist in their modesty. In his novel, Powell turned a temperamental inability to talk about himself to an advantage; he doesn't repeat that here. One needs a subject; given that Powell will not take himself as one, as an auto-

[2] *The Novels of Anthony Powell* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1976).

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biographer does, he must find one external to himself. I have never been so fascinated by Widmerpool in his own right as most readers, yet Widmerpool is what the memoirs lack, inasmuch as the character gave Powell a subject upon which to exercise his style. He doesn't have that here—or, rather, he has a series of subjects, each providing the occasion for a well-wrought two or three pages. But there's very little to connect those short scenes to each other, and this gives the memoirs a fragmentary quality that makes reading them an exercise in frustration. At times, in *Infants of the Spring* especially, Powell does pursue a single subject for a dozen pages, as he does with Orwell or Bowra. This concentration upon a single subject at length produces a formal intensity altogether lacking in these books as a whole, and one wishes that instead of letting his memoirs take their present form, Powell had produced a volume of similar portraits along the lines of David Garnett's *Great Friends*. These books are always lively, engaging, and important as sources for those interested in the period. But they are modest in every sense of the word.

Yet for all that, valuable. The ways in which Powell withholds personal information finally present something more useful and interesting than frankness—some insight, however fleeting, into the psychology behind the *Dance*. This is true above all of the title he has chosen for the series (one presumes there will be at least one more volume): *To Keep the Ball Rolling*, a title taken, along with the first volume's epigraph, from Conrad's *Chance*:

> To keep the ball rolling I asked Marlow if this Powell was remarkable in any way.
>
> "He was not exactly remarkable," Marlow answered with his usual nonchalance. "In a general way it's very difficult to become remarkable. People won't take sufficient notice of one, don't you know."

Powell has made a career out of that quotation—from remarking, or taking sufficient notice, of others, and from not, some would say, taking sufficient notice of himself. But a character not worth remarking? No; that modesty is simply the attitude Powell has found essential to the production of his fiction, something more than a pose yet less than the truth. The pedestrian don't have so many interesting friends and aren't snapped up as undergraduates by talent scouts like Maurice Bowra. And they don't write novels like the *Dance*, a work that even its critics must account in some way remarkable. This epigraph is Powell's ironic acknowledgement of that fact; these memoirs—tantalizing, for all their faults, in the occasional glimpse they offer of those deeply felt views—a way to keep his own ball rolling, just outside the reader's grasp.

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CLARA CLAIBORNE PARK

A Personal Road

"THE GOOD SOUTH, bestowing blessings at the cradle of storytellers, endowed her most tenderly with a sense of place." It is next to impossible to write about the fiction of Southern writers without the phrase "a sense of place"—if Eudora Welty hadn't used it in her foreword to these collected stories of Elizabeth Spencer's,[1] I would have had to. "The best of American fiction has always been regional," wrote Flannery O'Connor in an essay on this very subject. "The ascendancy passed from New England to the Midwest to the South; it has passed to and stayed longest wherever there has been a shared past, a sense of alikeness, and the possibility of reading a small history in a universal light." Yet in calling attention to the importance of what is shared, the sharp solidity of this statement serves to remind us of how different one Southern writer is from another. Elizabeth Spencer would not give—would not choose to give—even so unexceptionable a statement such sureness of definition. In the longest story here, concerning a character we cannot know since we see only his effect on her protagonist, she speaks of "the inaccuracy of the usual human statement," how it springs up "irresistibly as weeds in a great ruin." So her own statement on the sense of place is made less magisterially: "What I'm talking about is how you take up residence in the world," she writes, "it comes to that for all of us, whether we stay put or not." She would not agree with O'Connor that the writer who "does leave and stay gone" does so at his peril, for she did not stay put. After an education all Southern and three novels set in Mississippi, she got a Guggenheim, went to Italy, married an Englishman, and never really came back. A third of the stories, including some of the best, are laid in Italy, her "second country," and her most recent territory, Montreal. Yet six of the eight most recent stories return to Mississippi, to the images she speaks of in her preface, that "never go away; they do not even fade." "The pasture the child of the first story looks across to find her playmate in the yellow dress is the same as the one where the girl races her calico pony in the last story." That story, with parking lots and hamburger places added to its settled houses and stables and barns, evokes a South that is not O'Connor's, not Eudora Welty's either, a South milder, less idiosyncratic, easily recognizable to non-Southerners as part of America. Flannery O'Connor

[1] THE STORIES OF ELIZABETH SPENCER. Foreword by *Eudora Welty*. Doubleday. $14.95.

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listed among the South's "exploitable benefits" for the writer its history of defeat, and the existence of a "real peasant class." I remember, in the late forties, laying bets on how many minutes would elapse before one of my elderly relatives would mention The War; it was never more than twenty. Spencer is younger than I am; the distance her South has come from that history of defeat which for O'Connor taught the reality of the Fall is measured by the fact that the only reference to the War I can recall in all these stories is a cynical joke. Nor is a peasant class, black or white, an exploitable resource of Spencer's South. Though she wrote strongly of racial justice in her novel *The Voice at the Back Door,* blacks (a word well-bred Southerners once avoided as insulting) are peripheral—though not negligible—here, as are the rural poor whites so vivid in Faulkner and Welty and O'Connor. Yet no other Southern writer faces so clear-eyed the dirty little secret it's possible to keep, even to ignore, in other, more mobile regions, but which is the central reality of the settled life of a Southern town—the divisibility of human society into classes. There the sense of place is vertical as well as horizontal; part of knowing who you are is knowing where you are, not only in knowing your locality, but also, in the nearly obsolete English sense, knowing your place. A Southern child cannot "take up residence in the world" in unconsciousness of class. That invisible scale is built into language, and Spencer delicately brushes in the nuances. Marilee, the narrator of one of the best of the early stories, who turns up again in some of the later ones, may be able to make a joke of "our glorious dead," but she breathed in the sense of class with the scented air; she lives it without thinking about it. Explaining that her family's place is off the road and you'll have to ask the way, "Everybody knows us," she says, and adds immediately, "Not that we are anybody, I don't mean that." The Summeralls aren't anybody, unlike Foster Hamilton, Marilee's drunken boyfriend who "came from a real good family" and had such perfect manners that when he praised her mother's cooking "they'd go on together till you'd think that all creation had ground and wound itself down through the vistas of eternity to bring the two of them face to face for exchanging compliments over peach pickle." But the Summeralls aren't nobody, either; the scale has many gradations. People aren't dirt poor in this elastic middle class. Wherever they are on the ladder, the girls dress well. Spencer takes an insider's pleasure in conveying the sense of a well-dressed woman, "immaculate and fresh . . . gloves snow white and stocking seams straight," reminding us of Miss Welty's description of her first sight of the young Elizabeth, looking pretty, "as nice Southern girls were supposed to do in the Forties." Caring about how you look, here, is part of knowing who you are; another part is knowing where you belong.

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In a later story Marilee notes a man she's just met "has a name like a Catholic"—attractive to iconoclastic Marilee, but a hurdle "high as a steeple" to her kin. In "First Dark" Frances, a young woman several rungs above Marilee, who reads Jane Austen to her mother in the fine old house that threatens to engulf her, muses on a new acquaintance: "What had happened to his parents? There was some story, but it was not terribly interesting, and, his people being of no importance, she had forgotten." In the throwaway phrase about "his people" the whole region breathes. In the remarkable last story of the collection, "The Girl Who Loved Horses," in the flower of her youth and pride, looks over the attractive new handyman.

> "Who is he?" she asked her mother, not quite low enough, and meaning what a Southern woman invariably means by that question, not what is his name but where did he come from, is he anybody we know? What excuse, in other words, does he have for being born?

High above him on her horse, sure and beautiful, she still feels the current of sexuality between them; the boy steps back and stumbles, and she laughs. For all its security, this is not a world in which we are invited to feel at ease; nostalgia, like sin, is behovely, but one's residence in the world changes these days, morally as well as physically, and the times do not permit us to be unconscious even of the air we breathe. Marilee's high-toned boyfriend drinks away his talents, and she must eventually be glad she didn't marry him. Frances will be rescued from crazy old-maidhood by the man whose people were of no importance. And Deedee who loves horses will be attacked at gunpoint by the young man she humiliated three years before, whose eyes, she cannot help seeing, are beautiful, and who is all too bitterly "the kind to whom nothing good can happen." "When I'm through with you you ain't never going to have nothing to ask nobody about me because you're going to know it all and it ain't going to make you laugh none." To get away from him she will humiliate him again, her penalty that she must know exactly what she is doing, and live with his eyes seen below her, as once from her horse: eyes "worthless, nothing, but infinite, never finishing—the surface there was no touching bottom for—taking to them, into themselves, the self that was hers no longer."

"The good South" of Spencer's stories is something less than uniformly benign. "I think she would agree," writes Miss Welty, "that Southern writers really don't have much excuse for writing vaguely or unobservantly or without enlightenment about human relationships" (does anybody?) "when they thrive in the thick of family life." Agree? She would hardly, I think, go along with the sentence to its

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end. Not all her characters live in the thick of family life; of those who do, most do not thrive there. The pervasive theme of the stories, now that it is possible to see them all together, is the need to get away.

The theme is broached softly. Spencer's writing is utterly without ostentation. We may stop, if particularly alert to such things, to recognize a master of metaphor. One would think it would be impossible to overlook writing like this description of lovers who have

> reached the shore, an extremity of sorts, and had already discovered themselves on the other side of a wall, shut, enclosed, in the garden that everyone knows is there, where even the flowers are carnivorous and stir to avid life at the first footfall.

But most readers will be conscious only that the writing is very good; it is doubtless this controlled subservience of style to mood, character, event, to *story* that has made it possible for her to publish stories of such quality in magazines ranging from *Southern Review* and *The New Yorker* to *McCall's*. "The rush and whisper of rain came from every distance. Inside, the air clung like cloth." Even so stunning an example of onomatopoeia never demands our attention as "poetic"; the readers who encountered it in *Redbook* were free to enjoy it and pass on. "Knights and Dragons," in which it appears, is in fact a novella, the longest story in the collection. It is laid in Italy, the Southern baggage so completely left behind that its existence is not even implied. "Martha Ingram had come to Rome to escape something"; the first sentence is explicit. But such explicitness is uncharacteristic; the stories are so understated, so cannily written, that it takes longer than one would think to recognize their preoccupation with so wide-open a theme.

Perhaps that is because the escapes themselves are not wide-open. Frances of "First Dark" does escape scot-free from "the land of mourning and shadows and memory," as the traveling lady of "The White Azalea," astonished at her daring, tears up the letters that have reached her from home and buries them in a Roman flower pot—"beyond doubt the most beautiful family funeral of them all." But these are early stories; perhaps it seemed possible to escape scot-free then. In the later work it is no longer the exhilaration of escape we feel, but the hard need for it, and the inexorable cost.

For though we breathe a sigh of relief as Frances leaves the past behind, our mind knows better. Few escapes are so simple. Martha Ingram has fled an overwhelming husband to live as her own woman in Italy, but the emissaries of his vulnerability are not so easily put off. One does not murder the past unscathed: "In freeing herself she had met dissolution, and was a friend now to any landscape, a companion to cloud and sky." Young Nancy in "Ship Island" runs out on her considerate, kind upperclass boyfriend, and

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he can't understand why. The weight of class cannot be explained, only enacted. When he protests, "I was doing my best to be nice to you," and asks, "in this handsome, sincere, and democratic way," "why wasn't that enough?" she can only say (untruly) that she doesn't know. That story is a dress rehearsal for another, a fine long one which took ten more years to get itself written. "I, Maureen" is set in Montreal, reminding us that the pressure of class, like the need to escape, is not confined to the South. Maureen is another kind of Nancy, grown up, beloved, married, nurtured by just such another nice, good man. As Denis Partham's wife she has "everything a woman in her right mind could want." Parthams are somebody: "It would be silly not to be a Partham, since a Partham is what one so fortunately is." Her family cannot believe her luck any more than she can. She's not "pretty or classy." "I never had anything resembling looks or background. I was a bit run-down looking all my life." Yet he loves her: "Before I knew it, he had enveloped me all over, encased me like a strong vine." To escape the pressure of Partham sureness, Partham adequacy, she must escape out of her right mind, injure herself and him, lose her son and daughter—all this, yet not repudiate the necessity of her escape. "It didn't have to be that way," he tells her. But it did.

Some escape and pay. Others, like Uncle Rex in "Indian Summer," escape for a time but cannot make it good, returning to where their lives are and must be. And there are others, like Marilee herself, who don't escape at all, but remain to populate the small towns of the South, and its stories. Spencer's preface, significantly, is fictively addressed to Marilee, who stayed put. "To place this many stories in the order in which they were written . . . may suggest that the writer thinks she has started out low and lowly but mounted high. It isn't meant that way. I think rather of walking down a certain path, a personal road." Marilee stayed put, but Elizabeth Spencer left. Her stories, in series, remind us that their pervasive pattern is not confined to one region alone, nor to one sex, although most of the stories are seen from the point of view of a girl or woman. The pattern is human. Memory and art are a way of holding onto what we have to escape, the only way, perhaps, of eating one's cake and having it too. Spencer's characters are not artists. But Spencer is. It is pleasant to know that in the dread and boisterous country of Faulkner and O'Connor, someone else has for more than thirty years been walking her own path, with quiet tread.

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GILBERTO PEREZ

The First and Other Persons

THE IMAGE OF A YOUNG WOMAN READING haunts a writer in Italo Calvino's *If on a winter's night a traveler.*[1] Observed every day through the writer's spyglass, from the heights overlooking the valley where she placidly sits, this young woman immaculately abandoned to the pleasures of reading is enough to drive this normally productive fabricator of best sellers to writer's block. What can he write that would secure her pleasure, what words deserving of her enthrallment? The reverse of a reader over his shoulder, she is something still more inhibiting, a reader waiting there to be reached, from across the immeasurable distance that separates them.

Readers and writers populate Calvino's new novel, which takes as its central subject the transactions between them. Those transactions are always marked by an unbridgeable distance between reader and writer: although each must form some notion of what the other is like, for otherwise communication between them could not proceed, the two remain irrevocably separated from each other. Writing, though based on speech, essentially differs from it, from the language of the human encounter, face to face. Unacquainted with each other, the reader and the writer make their encounter on the thin meeting ground of the page. When the blocked best-selling author and the young woman eventually become acquainted, it's not as writer and reader that they meet, but as man and woman: he clumsily attempts to seduce her, but she doesn't want him, she wants the seduction of his printed words. Calvino is not original in seeing fiction as a kind of seduction, proposed by the writer and expected by the reader, but he is unusual in being quite aware, at the same time, of the problematic nature of a seduction that can only be conducted at a distance.

Face to face, we naturally speak to one another in the first person, addressing a second, referring to a third, the situation of our mutual presence concretely establishing a speaker, a listener, an absent third party; but on the page writer and reader are mutually absent parties who are nonetheless engaged in an exchange. In this abstracted encounter, however, something of the face-to-face situation is retained: a sense of the writer as being like a speaker, although, to the reader, he's an absent first person; and of the reader

[1] IF ON A WINTER'S NIGHT A TRAVELER, by *Italo Calvino.* Trans. by *William Weaver.* Harcourt Brace Jovanovich. $12.95.

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as being like a listener, although he's an absent second person to the writer. Whether or not the grammatical first or second person is actually employed in the writing, these first and second persons absent from each other are implied. If nowhere else than in the reader's mind, the writer is a first person addressing him, for the reader must take the words on the page before him as a human utterance, the expression of someone's intended meaning, in order to make sense of them. If nowhere else than in the writer's mind, the reader is a second person being addressed, for the writer must intend his words for a human recipient, someone he hopefully foresees who will take interest in them and to whom they will make sense. The page bespeaks a transacting "I" and "you," of however uncertain standing.

"You are about to begin reading Italo Calvino's new novel": so Calvino begins his novel, addressing a "you" that we may at first suppose to be the reader in general. The Italian second person being more precise than the English, in Calvino's original this "you" is unequivocably in the singular—he addresses an individual about to read his novel in the isolation in which we normally read novels—and is moreover the familiar *tu*, as if already from the start the novelist were taking with the reader the liberties of a seducer. It soon becomes clear that, in fact, Calvino has in mind one reader in particular, a fictional second person whom he makes into a character in the book. How else, he suggests, can a novelist be on familiar terms with the reader unless by inventing him? True, this invented second person is not given a name, a capitalized Reader being his sole appellation, and his features as a character are slow to emerge and never very distinct: the novelist seems reluctant to portray him, preferring, one gathers, to keep him as much as possible a figure of the common reader. Still, this Reader must be invested with particular attributes, a story must be contrived for him, if he is to function as a character and thus a person the novelist feels entitled to address as though he knew him.

"Once you're absorbed in reading," Calvino tells him, "there will be no budging you": this Reader is of the same type as the young woman in the valley, the type who seeks from reading total immersion in another world, who likes nothing better than to fall into the grip of a good story with a beginning, a middle and an end. He does indeed expect seduction from a book; having purchased the new one by Calvino, he can't wait to get home with it and be alone with the illusion proposed by the words. But, as in every good story, trouble awaits the Reader in his own. No sooner has the illusion taken hold than, again and again in the vicissitudes of his reading, suddenly it's broken off. He's given only beginnings to read, this man avid for continuation: ten different beginnings, all promising but all interrupted just when, in each story he attempts, things are getting really interesting. First attempting the Calvino, he finds that

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his copy of it, owing to a printer's error, repeats the same section over and over after page 32. Calvino (who works for a publishing house) takes care to explain how such an error can come about: here as elsewhere in this novel he devotes precise attention to the physical constitution of books.

Back at the bookstore the next day, the Reader learns that he has apparently not been reading the Calvino, but a Polish novel entitled *Outside the town of Malbork,* which now, having started it, he'd like to continue; but what he gets from the bookseller is a wholly new book. Very different from the other, which was ominously unspecific—a provincial train station that could be anywhere, an unnamed traveler arriving at night with a mysterious suitcase—this newly begun novel "wants to present to you a corporeal world, thick, detailed," where everything "is very precise, things with their nomenclature and the sensations that things transmit." But before the end of the first chapter, "at the moment when your attention is gripped by the suspense, in the middle of a decisive sentence, you turn the page and find yourself facing two blank sheets . . . You turn another page and find the next two are printed properly. Blank, printed; blank, printed; and so on until the end . . . And so you see this novel so tightly interwoven with sensations suddenly riven by bottomless chasms, as if the claim to portray vital fullness revealed the void beneath." The Reader tries to piece together the story from the fragments of it printed amid the blanks; but there are too many gaps. Solid though a fictional world may seem, it actually rests, as Calvino reminds us, on the flimsy foundation of printed words. Potent though the illusion may be that the words evoke, they necessarily omit much more than they include of the world they propose. This case of misprinting only points up a general condition: there are always, in any narrative, countless gaps that the reader must be able to fill in if he is to enjoy a vicarious involvement in it.

Calvino's novel alternates between the Reader's story, told in the second person in chapters addressed to him, and the beginnings in which the Reader successively seeks involvement. In the series of interrupted narratives Calvino does a brilliant impersonation of an assortment of literary modes, from East European cluttered to Simenon-like criminal to Japanese erotic, managing each time to engross us in a fictional world while wittily pointing to the premises on which it is constructed. One premise shared by all these varied narratives, however, is the first-person narrator, the postulated "I" of a character telling the story from the standpoint of a participant. This is, of course, a common device in fiction, but here Calvino surprises us with our own readiness, as a new narrator takes over at each new beginning, to grant each fictional "I" in turn the status of a person. Already the first narrator, the unnamed traveler with the suitcase, leads us to ponder why we should accept his "I":

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> I am not at all the sort of person who attracts attention, I am an anonymous presence against an even more anonymous background. If you, reader, couldn't help picking me out among the people getting off the train and continued following me in my to-and-fro-ing between bar and telephone, this is simply because I am called "I" and this is the only thing you know about me, but this alone is reason enough for you to invest a part of yourself in the stranger "I." Just as the author, since he has no intention of telling about himself, decided to call the character "I" as if to conceal him, not having to name him or describe him, because any other name or attribute would define him more than this stark pronoun; still, by the very fact of writing "I" the author feels driven to put into this "I" a bit of himself, of what he feels or imagines he feels. Nothing could be easier for him than to identify himself with me; for the moment my external behavior is that of a traveler who has missed a connection, a situation that is part of everyone's experience. But a situation that takes place at the opening of a novel always refers you to something else that has happened or is about to happen, and it is this something else that makes it risky to identify with me, risky for you the reader and for him the author; and the more gray and ordinary and undistinguished and commonplace the beginning of this novel is, the more you and the author feel a hint of danger looming over that fraction of "I" that you have heedlessly invested in the "I" of a character whose inner history you know nothing about, as you know nothing about the contents of that suitcase he is so anxious to be rid of.

But we do accept the address of this narrating cipher, form some image of him in our minds, invest something of ourselves in him; and likewise we accept the string of strangers who, in every other chapter, speak to us in the first person, even though we're made quite aware of the concocted nature of this "I" whose provenance keeps shifting each time.

Perhaps the begun Calvino was a Polish novel, and perhaps the Polish novel, the Reader comes to suspect, was in fact written in Cimmerian, a dead language on which he consults a leading expert, Professor Uzzi-Tuzii, who produces an untranslated Cimmerian book he maintains is the one in question. It has no relation to either of the other two—except for being also in the first person. What "I" can it be that speaks to the Reader, and to us with him, through the professor's "laborious extempore translation" of an unfinished, disputed text written in a language that nobody speaks any more or even knows exactly how to pronounce? Uzzi-Tuzii's rendering is marked by frequent corrections, difficult passages read in the original, "gestures . . . inviting you to be content with approximate

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equivalents," digressions "to state grammatical rules, etymological derivations, quoting the classics." And yet this "I," like all the others, comes alive on Calvino's pages as the Reader falls under its spell. Just as we may tune out the noise in a crowded room to listen to the particular voice we want to hear, so the Reader can disregard all interference from the professor's mediation in favor of an imagined original "I." In a narrative, Calvino suggests, we want to hear a voice, we need to imagine someone addressing us even when we well recognize how dubious that person's provenance may be.

The fictional first person acquires a fresh significance, moreover, by being juxtaposed with the much less common device of a fictional second person, a "you" as patently concocted as the variegated "I's." This "you" and "I" are necessary fictions, Calvino appears to be saying: his employing them side by side as devices serves to bring out, and make us examine, the implicit "you" and "I" of reader and writer, who must imagine each other in order to conduct their exchange. Only an ingenuous reader would equate a narrating "I" with the author, and yet something of that ingenuousness is called for in any reader for the fictional first person to have its effect: we accept the narrator's address as a substitute for what we really want to hear, which is the voice of that ultimate stranger, the writer to whom we attribute the words on the page. Maybe the author, the presumed source of those words, is the myth that readers in certain quarters believe him to be: the members of a study group in Calvino's novel, for example, feminist-semiotic in their persuasion, discuss literature in jargon-ridden generalities that systematically eradicate from it the sense of a human exchange. But literature becomes meaningless without that sense. Certainly the author, as this novel insists on reminding us, is an elusive figure, but we seem to require him as an absent partner, a possible person we can transact with, even if we have to invent him for ourselves—just as Calvino invented his Reader, acknowledging in this way a comparable need on the writer's side of the exchange.

A sworn enemy of the author, foremost among the characters in this novel in disputing his existence, is a "treacherous translator" named Ermes Marana. The man responsible for the confusion between the Calvino and the Polish novel, and between that and the Cimmerian, and so on with no end in sight, Marana persistently perpetrates forgeries and supplies publishers with maddeningly unreliable versions of unverifiable originals: *traduttóre,* and *traditóre* with a vengeance. Why such zeal at literary treachery? Like the best-selling author, this translator has an obsession, which in his case seems quite unshakable, with the young woman absorbed in reading. Her intimacy with books makes him jealous beyond control, and so he is determined to prove that they're all a sham, that all literature rests on a fundamental fraudulence. In the writer's block her absorption induces in a veteran accomplisher with the reading

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public, she's like a virgin whose purity a crafty philanderer can't bring himself to violate; but to Marana, on the contrary, she's been promiscuously yielding to the overtures of cheats he aims to expose. He goes to great lengths, all over the world, to establish the ubiquity of literary falsehood, to throw the whole notion of authorship into disrepute, becoming himself as hard to track down as he wants to make the source of every story, founding an international organization to further his schemes, Apocryphal Power, which grows too big for his leadership—no doubt as he intended—and splits into two rival factions with agents anonymously everywhere. (Is one such agent, we may wonder, the traveler with the suitcase, which perhaps contains a stolen or a counterfeit manuscript? But that is another story.) Nothing budges the young woman, however, from her desire to sit (or lie) down with a good book, to give herself over to the enticements of the page.

Marana should have foreseen his efforts would be in vain. For, being no fool, she knows what she's getting into when she enters a fictional world; not needing to be told, let alone have it endlessly reiterated by Marana, that such a world is an illusion, she enters into it as a consenting adult. She lets herself be seduced, conscious that a book, like any attempt at seduction, advances an imposture, which she willingly accepts so long as it carries the requisite conviction and charm. Of course she is herself a fiction, a character made up by Calvino, who calls her the Other Reader (*la Lettrice,* the "Female Reader," in the original) because she is the woman in the Reader's story and a fellow reader plagued by several of the same interruptions. Near the beginning of his story, he meets her at the bookstore, where both are returning identically faulty copies of the Calvino; and his story, which alone in this novel gets past a beginning, not only develops into an entangled middle but also comes to a happy ending in his marriage to her. And so, in retrospect, the frustrations shared by the two as readers can be seen to have fostered a bond between them that eventually brings them together as a married couple. But what about the frustrations in *our* reading, the interruptions *we* have endured? The postponement of gratification can work nicely in a seduction, but the lengths at which it goes on here deliberately strain its effectiveness as a ploy. What are Calvino's designs on us, the actual readers of his book, the readers he can't pretend to know?

Just because he doesn't know us, he's testing us, it seems to me, to make sure that we are the kind of readers he wants, agreeable but not gullible, willing to surrender ourselves to the printed words and at the same time aware of the imposture they're asking us to accept. A truly adult consenter to the seductions of fiction may be hard to find these days, but Calvino doesn't care to have the imagined company of anybody else. Although he aims to please, the cheap successes a writer can have with the reader are not for him; he refuses

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to lure us into *his* imagined company under false pretenses. He is a seducer who displays his strategies as he works them on us, and that was part of the pleasure I derived from reading his book.

With the blunt admission it makes, the title of Gregor von Rezzori's novel, *Memoirs of an Anti-Semite,*[2] prepares us for a fiction in a mode of candid self-revelation. On the dust jacket we learn some facts about the author—born in the Bukovina in 1914, for a time lived in Bucharest, later in Germany, now lives in Italy with his Italian wife—all of which match the account of the protagonist given in the pages inside. This protagonist is also the narrator of four of the five stories that make up the book, and though his name gets no mention in any of the stories save one, there it's Gregor. Moreover, the form of first person Rezzori employs, whether truthful or not, holds out the appeal of autobiographical truth-telling: the "I" of a memoirist looking back on his past experiences from the appraising perspective of many years since, and giving us the feeling that now he has no stake in those matters and can afford to be frank. This is quite unlike the "I" of a narrator, such as those in Calvino's book, who relates an ongoing action from within its midst, and thus cannot offer us the sense of a summing up. In the first four stories, Rezzori's narrator recollects his life as a boy of thirteen in the Bukovina, his young manhood in Bucharest, his experiences in Vienna during the thirties and, briefly recounted, in Germany during the war and immediate post-war. Significantly, in the last story, which abruptly brings us forward to 1979 and from there meanders into the protagonist's recent past, Rezzori switches to the third person, as if to say that the memoirist's "I" will not do when dealing with the confusions of the present or with memories too recent to have fallen into place. His book invites us to wonder, in any case, to what extent we may equate the narrator, and the man in the last story, with the author; even if it were all a fabrication, it plants in our minds the question of where to draw the line between fiction and fact, and arouses our curiosity with that question, which certainly helps it enlist our interest.

In the upper-class milieu to which he was born in the old Austro-Hungarian Empire, the protagonist had anti-Semitism bred into him like table manners: it was something taken for granted in that milieu, one of the beliefs on which a world-view was built. Austro-Hungary already had collapsed, and the Bukovina was part of Rumania, by the time the narrator was the boy in the first story; but beliefs have a way of outlasting empires, and the boy's family held to their genteel anti-Semitism as unquestioningly as they continued to think of themselves as Austrians. In this first story he tells of his friendship with another boy, a Jew, and of the sorry consequences prejudice has, through his own thoughtless agency, both on the

[2] MEMOIRS OF AN ANTI-SEMITE, by *Gregor von Rezzori.* Trans. by *Joachim Neugroschel* and *Gregor von Rezzori.* Viking. $13.95.

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Jewish boy's father, a local doctor who ends up barred from the medical profession, and on his own uncle, a rural aristocrat who falls into disgrace with his peers and dies a broken man. Anti-Semitism leads to grief in all of these stories, which proceed on into this century in which it was to show itself at its most hideous; and yet it lingers, a remnant of an increasingly untenable world-view, in the man looking back at episodes in his life that center on various salient relationships he has had with Jews. Most of these have been with Jewish women: a love affair with a widow, a beautiful older woman who was very sweet to him, and whom he treated callously, during his days as a young man in Bucharest; a close friendship with a bright and pretty woman in Vienna, who brought him out of his awkwardness and introduced him to the excitements of the city, who probably loved him and whom he no doubt would have loved had she not been a Jew; a marriage, his second and a failure like his first, to a Jewish survivor from the Nazi persecution. Perhaps the saddest of these stories, and to me the most affecting in the book, is another one from the Bucharest days, "Löwinger's Rooming House," in which a Jewish woman takes the narrator into her confidence only to have it betrayed, and the genuine intimacy that develops between them goes for nought owing to a hapless combination of the young man's insecurities with his prejudice.

Rezzori's book depicts a man who admits to having acted badly, at times unpardonably, and who offers no excuses for his behavior—but no apologies either. Without his anti-Semitism he wouldn't be himself, and he has found it difficult enough to get a sense of himself through a life that began virtually on another planet and has since undergone so many changes, casting him into so many different roles in various places over the years of this turbulent century. I'm not sure whether it was Rezzori's decision or his publisher's to call this book a novel when it would seem more like a collection of stories, each pretty much self-contained, each with changed characters except for the protagonist—and it isn't even made quite clear that the "I" in the first four is the same person from one story to the next, or the same as the "he" in the last story. But calling the book a novel encourages us to look in it for unity, for continuity, more intently than we would otherwise, and this fits in with Rezzori's presentation of a man uncertain of his identity and in search of it through a retrospective of his past selves. This passage is from the final story:

> . . . what made him, the man with gray hair and the box of *marrons glacés* under his arm, walking along the Via Veneto to visit a Russian great-aunt of his (present, third, Italian) wife—what made him identical with the forty-year-old of twenty years ago, Rome-hungry and future-minded, freshly divorced from his (second, Jewish) wife, and expecting his little boy to be awarded to him; what made him one and the same person as the adolescent

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> on the hilltop in the Carpathians half a century ago and, even further back, the child who awakened at night (because they feared the Bolsheviks were coming), or the air-raid-shelter sitter under the hail of bombs in Berlin, and the freebooter in the intellectuals' interregnum during the Ice Age of the German rubble-cities, and the writer of screenplays for Cinecittà during the fifties—what made him one with all these characters and various other forms of his diverse metamorphoses? Yes, there was an answer. The thing that made them all one and the same person was: dreaming. When he thought *I*, he felt as if he was dreaming himself up: *Somnio, ergo sum*—I dream myself up, therefore I am.

And so Rezzori gives a new twist to our own uncertain identification of this man with Rezzori himself. For if the man is a fiction, he may still be a special kind of invented character, the author's fiction of himself: an invention such as we may make of ourselves when recalling the past, not dishonestly but to supplant irreclaimable facts, feeling that this must have been what we were like. And it's only in such fictions, in dreaming himself up, that the man can find an identity.

Another novel with an unmistakable flavor of the autobiographical is Czeslaw Milosz' *The Issa Valley*,[3] which portrays a boy growing up in that valley in the author's native Lithuania. First published in Paris in 1955, Milosz' novel, written in Polish like all his other works, has not come out in English till now, after his winning of the Nobel Prize. In the Issa valley Milosz depicts, we assume him to be evoking the landscape of his childhood; and in the boy, called Thomas, we see a surrogate of the author. This book, however, has none of the self-consciousness of Rezzori's, and none of the air of self-disclosure. Rather it is a sedate third-person narrative about a vanished world Milosz seeks to re-create not as it appeared to Thomas, or as filtered through a recollecting mind, but in its fullness and solidity. A character without any strong distinctive features, the boy is almost a pretext for the re-creation of the valley, the vivid descriptive passages on its flora and fauna, the anecdotes about the life of its other, more colorful inhabitants. Reading this book, I couldn't help thinking of the "corporeal world, thick, detailed" of Calvino's imitation Polish novel: here is the genuine article. And it holds together: although not without its stretches of tedium, the book conveys, impressively, a sense of closeness to nature and of the integrity and stability of life in a traditional society. Some have complained about its discursiveness, and indeed it doesn't offer much in the way of a connecting plot; but the descriptions and anecdotes are rich enough in themselves, and surely the book de-

[3] THE ISSA VALLEY, by *Czeslaw Milosz*. Trans. by *Louis Iribarne*. Farrar Straus & Giroux. $13.95.

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rives all the unity it needs from its focus on the valley and the connections inherent there. Milosz being best known as a poet, no doubt this will be termed a poet's novel, since it's concerned with situations and sensations rather than with keeping the story moving: nothing wrong with that, I'd say.

It would be a mistake, however, to fall into ready praise of Milosz' assured concreteness at the expense of Rezzori's identity crisis. For Milosz' kind of presentation can be possible only with such an environment as his Issa valley, small and self-enclosed and unchanged within memory: a place locked away from history, which can at most be glimpsed once in a while over the hills. He performs a salutary function in presenting to us, with conviction and without sentimentality, a picture of that lost wholeness; but, as he knows better than anyone else, that wholeness was lost to history, the arena in which Rezzori's book takes place, and into which we've all been thrown to conduct our lives.

Among the disasters of history, one of the worst was the Thirty Years War, unparalleled until this century among those suffered by the German nation. In his new novel, *The Meeting at Telgte,*[4] Günter Grass seeks to make just such a parallel between that war in the seventeenth century—a war fought on the battleground of Germany, ostensibly between Catholics and Protestants but in fact much more entangled politically—and the German disaster in the Second World War. Historical comparisons have played a prominent part in Grass's fiction: different periods brought together for our examination, so that they can be seen in a new light through their juxtaposition; the past brought to bear upon the present, the space of our concerns. His last novel, *The Flounder,* was his broadest in scope, ranging from the Neolithic era to our epoch with several stops in between. The new book is much more narrow: large though his topic is potentially, Grass confines himself to a meeting of writers he imagines to have taken place in 1647, when the thirty years of war were nearing an end. At Telgte, a town in Westphalia situated between the two cities, one Catholic and the other Protestant, where lengthy peace negotiations were being held, Grass has writers from all over Germany assemble to discuss the state of their devastated nation and of its language and literature. No such meeting actually occurred back then, but one like it did come about in 1947, when German writers assembled for a similar purpose under similar circumstances of national division and devastation. This was the first of the meetings, regularly convened in subsequent years, of "Group 47," a writers' organization with which Grass himself has been associated and which was to acquire considerable importance in German post-war letters.

[4] THE MEETING AT TELGTE, by *Günter Grass.* Trans. by *Ralph Manheim.* Harcourt Brace Jovanovich. $9.95.

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So here again it's with the present very much in mind that Grass makes his excursion into the past. We're meant to read the book on the two levels of then and now: to see an equivalence, for example, between the Protestant persuasion of all the writers at Telgte—with one notable exception—and the pro-Western sympathies of "Group 47"; or to recognize the divergence between the outcome of Grass's fictional meeting, which falls apart in utter failure, and the relative success of the writers of today in having some impact on their society. The first person employed in the book is rather curious, presumably the "I" of an unnamed writer who was among those assembled at Telgte, but an "I" that turns up only sporadically and each time surprises us a little, as if an extraneous presence were intruding on what's basically a third-person narrative. Like the narrator in *The Flounder,* plainly a man of today who projects himself into past epochs and speaks as if he had been a succession of different men over the ages, the narrator here gives us the feeling of a voice from the present projected into the past: this "I" suggests Grass imagining himself as a writer in the seventeenth century, or inviting his fellow writers now to imagine themselves back then.

For me, however, the seventeenth century depicted here tended to recede out of reach, as was not the case in *The Flounder* with the eras going as far back as the Neolithic. Granted, I'm not very familiar with the historical figures Grass enlists as characters for his writers' meeting, but he manages well enough to breathe fictional life into them without unduly relying on previous knowledge; and the English edition appends descriptions of them and their period to make up for our likely lack of such knowledge. Rather than with that earlier period in German letters, it's a familiarity with the recent scene that Grass seems to assume in his readers to a greater extent than I have it, for he leaves wholly implicit in the book the contemporary situation he's juxtaposing with the seventeenth century. What principally made his Telgte appear recessive to me was not the way he depicts it in itself but the lack of a sufficiently strong sense of a now with which to compare the then: Grass's method of treating the past requires for its effect a firm grounding in the present. The most intriguing character in the book is one he calls Gelnhausen, a stand-in for Grimmelshausen, the author of *Simplicissimus*—a "picaresque and largely autobiographical novel," as the appendix describes it, "which is one of the great works of German literature"—and the creator of a character who also figures in Grass's book and who was previously made over by Bertolt Brecht into his Mother Courage. In the portrayal of this earthy Gelnhausen, as some reviewers have pointed out, Grass evidently has put in something of himself; and I thought I also saw resemblances to Brecht. But I couldn't be sure to what degree these were intended. It seemed to me pretty clear that Grass is drawing a parallel between Brecht's having had no part in "Group 47," given his alle-

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giance to the Communist camp, and the way that Gelnhausen here, being more or less allied with the Catholics, remains a marginal though inescapable figure at the gathering of Protestant writers. Does Grass then also mean, since he depicts Gelnhausen as an opportunistic rascal, to comment through this on Brecht's reasons for going over to East Germany? Not that I was looking for any precise correspondences between then and now, but too often in this novel the connections with the present could for me be only conjectures.

Nadine Gordimer is a brilliant oddity, a writer who combines a sensibility drawn to the inward, the subjective, with an urge to deal with the external facts of history and politics: rather as if Virginia Woolf had resolved to write about the problems of the working classes, and done so without forsaking her concern with delving into states of mind. A chronicler of her native South Africa, Gordimer turns a clear eye on the tense conditions of life there; and she's also expert at pinning down the elusive feeling, at rendering the quality of personal experience. Both sides of her talent are in evidence in her new novel, *July's People*,[5] and both are essential to its success. It depicts South Africa in the near future, and Gordimer the realistic observer conveys an almost documentary sense of a future that is no fantasy, but may well come about: the blacks have taken over, bringing violence everywhere, and the whites must flee their homes and run for their lives. And without Gordimer the student of sentiments this novel would likely have fallen into a facile moralizing irony, for the story she has set up skirts being too pat a reversal of situations between blacks and whites.

The white characters are a family, the Smales, who suddenly find themselves utterly dependent for their survival on their black servant of many years, a man called July among whites. With the airports being bombed, there seems to be no way for the Smales to leave the country, and July loyally takes them with him from the collapsed comforts of their life in Johannesburg to the place of refuge he can offer them in his remote, backward village. Gordimer avoids the easy points she could have scored off the deposed white masters having to live like poor blacks under the protection of their former servant. The obvious lessons are there to be drawn, and she does not belabor them: instead she focuses on the nuances and complexities present in a situation that appears clear-cut and simple at first glance. Mostly it is the white wife, Maureen Smales, who comes under her scrutiny. Married to a nice man who does as well as can be expected under the trying circumstances, Maureen becomes disaffected from him nonetheless, gradually and in spite of herself, in an emotional process Gordimer subtly delineates. We're led to suspect that the husband may be harboring like sentiments toward Maureen: brought together into the small space of a village

[5] JULY'S PEOPLE, by *Nadine Gordimer*. Viking. $10.95.

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hut, the Smales grow apart from each other, not because either of them is unable to cope with the primitive conditions, but because, one might say, their marriage wasn't intended for this space. Rather than the marriage, however, the central object of Gordimer's finely tuned attention is the changing interaction between Maureen and July. The Smales have been at one in their liberal convictions, but back in Johannesburg it fell mainly to the wife to deal with the servant and somehow reconcile his subservience to them with their belief that he should be treated as an equal human being; and now in July's village the uneasy amicability between Maureen and July develops little by little into an open animosity. Since July speaks a rudimentary English and Maureen doesn't know his language, much of what passes beween them remains unexpressed; but Gordimer is well able to communicate it. July is a character Gordimer sketches without presuming fully to understand him, in one of her reticent yet eloquent depictions of blacks in South Africa.

The protagonist of Philip Roth's *Zuckerman Unbound*[6] is a writer, Nathan Zuckerman, and obviously an autobiographical figure. Zuckerman has appeared before in Roth's fiction: in his last novel, *The Ghost Writer,* and as the surrogate of another of Roth's surrogates, Peter Tarnopol, in *My Life as a Man.* In the new novel Zuckerman's resemblances to Roth himself are strongly marked: the time is 1969, when Roth published *Portnoy's Complaint,* and Zuckerman has just published a novel sounding very much like it, *Carnovsky,* which has made him rich and famous, as *Portnoy* did Roth. *Zuckerman Unbound* is skillfully told and enjoyable, but I wonder what someone would make of it coming upon it without ever having heard of Philip Roth.

In this book, however, Roth has set out to deal with the problems brought on an author by people who identify him with his fictional character, as happens to Zuckerman with his estranged wife, his mother and dying father, his brother, friends of the family, strangers in the street who call him "Carnovsky" and unthinkingly believe him to be that obsessive onanist from New Jersey. It makes no difference if Zuckerman explains to any of these people that Carnovsky is only a fiction: they continue to take the character as fact, disguised here and there but surely a version of the author himself. A somewhat more sophisticated stranger Zuckerman encounters is a fellow Newark Jew, Alvin Pepler, who was once a local celebrity owing to his appearance on a television quiz show of the fifties, and who regards Zuckerman as Newark's Marcel Proust. That quiz show, "Smart Money," was of course rigged, and Pepler, who actually didn't need to have the answers fed to him like the other contestants, was phased out after three weeks in favor of a WASP winner. Ever since his three weeks of glory, Pepler has been trying to

[6] ZUCKERMAN UNBOUND, by *Philip Roth.* Farrar Straus & Giroux. $10.95.

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vindicate himself by writing a book that would tell the truth about the show, and now he pesters Zuckerman, in the funniest sections of this novel, with endless displays of his photographic memory and persistent requests for advice on his manuscript, which he would have him read just as he hands him in the street his review of *Carnovsky*. Pepler, a buffoon from Newark who had his moment of fame and money, seems clearly another version Roth is offering us of the author of *Portnoy's Complaint*.

Here, as before, Roth is laughing at himself. Zuckerman's love affair with a movie star, the talk of the gossip columns, is revealed to have been a one-night stand, a lonely man's awkward pursuit of a woman who left him for Fidel Castro. But Roth is also taking stock of himself, and here he adopts toward his surrogate the detachment of a third-person narration. Zuckerman's father's last words are to call him a bastard, doubtless for the autobiographical portrayal of the family given in *Carnovsky*. Last words uttered by one's father are not to be taken lightly: Roth is acknowledging that he was a bastard to have turned his life into material for his fiction without regard for those involved, and at the same time pleading that the fiction is his justification.Through this most autobiographical of his surrogates, he's giving up the pretense that the fiction is only that, granting their point to those people who have seen in it a picture of himself. He is also, however, upholding his right to have written it, in spite of the cost to himself and others. At the book's end, Zuckerman finds himself unbound from Newark, from his past, from all who were closest to him; but he has his art to help him through.

I'd like to comment briefly on two books that I don't think would merit notice were it not for the approval they and their authors have received elsewhere. Francine du Plessix Gray's *World Without End*[7] is like a novel by Judith Krantz, better written but essentially the same kind of rose-colored trash. It tells about three Beautiful People, Edmund, Sophie and Claire, friends since they met as adolescents during a summer in idyllic Nantucket, and now together in early middle age on another vacation, a trip to Russia from which, in alternate chapters, the book takes us into their past. Sophie loves Edmund, and the two lived together in New York back in the fifties, during a time when their sex together was fabulous and Edmund was enjoying a precocious acclaim in his career as a painter whom the laudatory reviews compared to Chardin; but Edmund's true love is Claire, who holds herself aloof, and he left Sophie and painting for the West Coast and an equally successful career as an art historian, not to mention several gorgeous lovers of both sexes. In the end it turns out that Claire loves Edmund too, and the two get married and go live happily ever after in Nantucket, where he

[7] WORLD WITHOUT END, by *Francine du Plessix Gray*. Simon and Schuster. $12.95.

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takes up painting again and receives the same acclaim as before. Meanwhile Sophie has ample compensation for her loss of Edmund as a lover not only in her unimpaired close friendship with him and Claire but also in her own greatly successful career as a television journalist. At least Gray keeps the machine of her sentimental fantasies running smoothly: if little else, her book afforded me a good read, which is more than I can say for Richard Ford's nearly impenetrable *The Ultimate Good Luck*.[8] Ford's novel goes as far as Gray's in the opposite direction, into nasty and brutish territory, where the trash comes in the raw, bloody and grimy and unmitigated by anything like Gray's romantic soft focus. I won't attempt to summarize a plot that seems intended to obstruct comprehension: something to do with cocaine smugglers in Mexico and an American who travels there to try to get his girlfriend's brother out of a messy situation. This American, a Vietnam veteran who might have been sent in by Central Casting for the role of an inarticulate tough guy, doesn't succeed in getting the brother out of anything, only in killing a lot of people. Through the gratuitous violence that fills this novel, Ford is attempting, one gathers, to make some kind of statement on the senseless violence around us all; but his book merely indulges the tough-guy mystique, a brand of sentimentality different from Gray's but no less of a falsification. If *World Without End* suggests a lavish Hollywood soap opera, *The Ultimate Good Luck* calls to mind a cheap action picture in which hastily collaborating hacks didn't quite manage to put a story together—except that in Ford's book there's a leaden affectation in his adopted blood-and-guts mode and in his mannered slangy prose.

[8] THE ULTIMATE GOOD LUCK, by *Richard Ford*. Houghton Mifflin. $9.95.

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VERNON SHETLEY

Versions of America

"Now I HOLD IT A VERITY, that even Shakespeare, was not a frank man to the uttermost. And indeed, who in this intolerant universe is, or can be? But the Declaration of Independence makes a difference." This peculiar statement is perhaps most *American* in its capacity still to astonish us. It amuses us, of course, with the cultural distance it allows us to measure; Melville has been wishing that Shakespeare had been an American, "& had promenaded on Broadway," a fate that few, in this day and age, are likely to wish upon the Bard. But it most surprises us, and most reveals itself, in the insouciant and casual way it puts forth a strange and dubious proposition, in the way Melville turns round and contrasts the situation of the great imaginative genius of the English language with his own situation, and finds the latter rather superior, and seems to pity Shakespeare his relative disadvantage. This is the strain that Whitman noted approvingly in Emerson, "a secret proclivity, American maybe, to dare and violate and make escapades."

Perhaps we might trace the origins of that strain back to the same point of origin that Melville here proposes for the American "difference." No reader can fail to be astonished when the drafters of the Declaration of Independence take that wild leap beyond all the fixed points of their time and assert certain truths "to be self-evident," a piece of rhetorical audacity that is most audacious precisely in its refusal to acknowledge its daring. But while Melville certainly had in mind the preamble's statement of principles, the context makes clear that he was also thinking of that other aspect of the Declaration, its specific announcement of a rupture with English authority and English tradition. The American "difference," Melville implies, while growing out of new ideals, will also define itself by a separation from the English heritage. Political independence enforces an imaginative independence; a declaration of political independence is necessarily a declaration of cultural independence.

The development of a literature that would realize that independence did not occur at once, however. That is not to deny the distinctive character of the works produced by the generation that followed the Revolution; while James Fenimore Cooper wrote an imitation of Jane Austen, no one is likely to mistake the author of *The Deerslayer* for the author of *Mansfield Park*. Yet we recognize the first great achievements of American Romanticism as the first great achievements of a distinctively American genius in literature, so

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when Larzer Ziff undertakes a study[1] of "those writers who established American literature as a distinct way of imagining the world," we assent to his choice of the generation of American Romantics from Emerson to Melville and Whitman. Within that boundary Ziff attempts a mild revision of the canon, elevating Poe to a position that, if not quite equal to that of Hawthorne, Thoreau, and the others mentioned above, yet approaches theirs, asking for a renewed recognition of such figures as George Lippard and Harriet Beecher Stowe, and a renewed appreciation for such figures as Margaret Fuller and George Washington Harris.

Ziff's approach might best be described as a placing, a locating of the writers and their work in the context of their times. Ziff employs a variety of methods: biographical, sociohistorical, even, least happily, formal analysis. While one notes appreciatively the absence of coercive ideologies and polemic in Ziff's outlook, and his general reluctance to pass judgments on his authors, one eventually becomes frustrated at a certain over-nicety in his use of evidence. He rarely marshals his facts in extended argument, but presents facts parallel to his argument. He argues by juxtaposition, placing facts or instances, historical or social, next to literary facts and instances. The technique often proves illuminating and suggestive; Ziff has a happy gift for generalizing about social phenomena in a way that immediately clarifies their significance for literature:

> Recourse to the family model as the only one available for any communal experiment regardless of its sexual organization, and recourse to the sibling relationship as the best example of understanding between a man and a woman, whether husband and wife or joint workers in a social cause—these were something more than habits of speech. In a deep fashion they indicated the enormous strain that contemporary life was inflicting upon the society's idealized and simple vision of itself. . . . As a response to increasing depersonalization in their daily lives, Americans would appear to have fantasized a fulfillment of the qualities they felt to be missing, and to have done so in terms of family bonds that were, at the time, dissolving.

But the technique remains just that, a technique, and Ziff's insights remain episodic and isolated. One cannot but feel the want of a more complete methodology or a more comprehensive argument. Ziff, in his juxtapositions, gives no thorough sense of how exactly it is that the pressure of the writer's times is reflected, opposed, transformed, or reacted to in the writer's work; the mediation between energies in society and in literature remains indistinct. From Ziff's

[1] LITERARY DEMOCRACY: The Declaration of Cultural Independence in America, by *Larzer Ziff*. Viking. $20.00.

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title one might expect a discussion of how the American polity brought forth and was reflected in the distinctive qualities of the national literature. That is, of course, what Alexis de Tocqueville's *Democracy in America* provides. But while Tocqueville's clairvoyant discussion of American literature certainly makes a daunting example, it does not exhaust the topic. One might have thought that, emboldened by the advantages of hindsight, Ziff would undertake something like a corrective to Tocqueville, based on evidence rather than on inspired deduction, but Ziff argues only obliquely, and presents his conclusions about the influence of American institutions on the American literary imagination largely by inference. That is not to censure Ziff for not having written a different book than he intended to, but to wish, rather, that he had charted more fully the dynamic between American literature and American culture that he sketches.

Ziff concentrates most fully on the effects of the economic upheaval at work in America between 1837 and the outbreak of the Civil War, the effect of industrial capitalism on the class structure and values of American society, and the effect of wealth and land-hunger on the ideals in which the American republic had been founded. Turning from the support of English literary tradition, the American writer looked homeward to a society that had neither much indulgence nor much attraction for him. Ziff, not without some justice, minimizes the role American nature played in shaping the American imagination; as Tocqueville pointed out, the American wilds only served to heighten the self-regarding habit of a people "insensible to the wonders of inanimate nature." One notes that even those American classics that deal with the "natural" life, *Typee* and *Walden*, have less praise of the beauties of nature than speculation on political economy and social organization, and to invoke a parallel in another art, one might find the rhetorical sublimity of such landscape artists as Thomas Cole or Frederic Church to be less vital and characteristic of the American attitude to nature than the works of such as Martin Johnson Heade or Fitz Hugh Lane, whose American locales are vast no-places, voids filled with different qualities of light. For the American writer, the forces of industrial capitalism, rather than the forces of nature, were the true "Me/Not-Me" against which his imaginative ambitions were played out.

Ziff does not lack a suitably double-edged understanding of the American writer's situation. He finds the growth of a national literature to depend on the confident national sense of self fostered by commercial and territorial expansion, yet he also observes that "the major writers came from the economic groups that were the most threatened" by the economic and social upheaval that expansion caused: "One is led to the hypothesis that not only did America need to come into possession of a positive nationalism before a native literature could flourish, but that it had to dispossess certain

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groups in the process so as to free (if not compel) their children to respond with the weapons of thought." While American literature would not evolve strictly as an adversary culture, neither could it celebrate its society without endangering its own identity. Ziff conveys this sense of the perplexity and pain felt by a generation of authors as they struggled to know themselves as Americans and yet realize ambitions that were more than merely national. A thorough mapping of those contrary inclinations might have shed light on a number of crucial topics. It might have helped us to understand Emerson's strange turn from the idealism of "The Over-Soul" to the bitter wisdom of *The Conduct of Life*, and helped us to see how a recent critic could speak of Henry Ford as an Emersonian. It might have helped us understand Whitman's contrary movements of expansion and withdrawal, and enabled us to see how Emerson could have thought that Thoreau, an insistent critic of the new nationist sentiment, was yet the truest American the nation had ever produced. But while Ziff encourages us to see the problematic of the writer's place in society, he does not shed the kind of light that would bring it clearly before our eyes.

Problematic the writer's situation certainly was. When Melville wrote the passage quoted at the beginning of this review, he was still a successful writer with a wide readership. He would soon find out, however, just how intolerant his particular universe was. His attempt to be "a frank man to the uttermost" resulted in the loss of his public, and Melville was to publish no fiction for the last thirty years of his life, during which time he was in most quarters thought of, if at all, as a flash in the pan. Most of the major writers of the time had periods of real difficulty in making a living and finding sufficient leisure to practice their art; neither Melville nor Poe ever really solved the problem. Confronted with adversity or public indifference, the European writer had the comfort of feeling himself supported by congenial examples in his nation's literary heritage; the English Romantics looked back to Milton and Spenser in their struggle against the taste of their times, the German Romantics found in their native ballads and folk poetry a spirit to oppose to that of their age. The American could only look forward.

Perhaps it is the forced violence of that forward look that accounts for the American preference for the stairway of surprise. Tocqueville said of the Americans that "above all, they must have what is unexpected & new. . . . they require strong and rapid emotions, startling passages, truths or errors brilliant enough to rouse them up and to plunge them at once, as if by violence, into the midst of the subject." Those are still the things that we want, no less from the American scholar than from the American poet or novelist. Ziff's measured chronicle is a useful spur to one's thinking and provides much useful information, but one finds wanting in it that stroke of truth or error that will kindle the whole.

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VERNON YOUNG

Africa Addio

For Peter Matthiessen the setting is the subject; for Isak Dinesen it is an intermittent background.[1] Letters *from* Africa but not, in proportion to the total, letters *about* Africa: written during the first ferment of modernism between the outbreak of World War I and the onset of a world depression, they conspicuously engage the "advanced" issues of a changing society in which Isak Dinesen was not then living, for which at heart she had little respect but which she felt compelled, for reasons of personal discomfort, to analyze, evaluate, explain or explain away. While we cannot doubt her deepening affection for the outpost country she learned to live in, fortified by her status of a benevolent imperialist in a small way, our dominant impression, from these letters, is not of a chronicle of safaris and farm management in British East Africa but rather of a collection of didactic essays concerned, for the greater part, with the role of women in a world of moral upheaval, with the character of nationality and race as she changeably observed its representatives in Kenya, and with a variety of ethical premises inspired by her reading (much of it in Danish literature, to the merits of which I cannot testify).

Strangely like Katherine Mansfield, Karen Dinesen's later years were foreshadowed by venereal disease. Her father hanged himself when she was ten years old; conjecture had it that his motivating depression was brought on by lingering syphilis. When she was twenty-one she fell in love with Baron Hans Blixen-Finecke; he did not reciprocate her attentions and five years later she married his twin brother (cf. Mansfield!), Bror Blixen, who had acquired a coffee farm in Kenya which he subsequently mismanaged with serious consequences to her inheritance of it in 1925. Other consequences were forthcoming. Shortly after her marriage she discovered that Blixen had infected her with syphilis, an ailment that plagued her for years thereafter yet not as sharply as many other matters she never quite succeeded in defining for herself in these inexhaustibly self-defining letters. She and Blixen were separated in 1921 (divorced in 1925); twelve years later she confessed to her brother Thomas, in the longest and most hortatory of the letters: "If it did not sound so beastly I might say that, the world being as it is, it was worth having syphilis in order to become a 'Baroness' . . . "

[1] LETTERS FROM AFRICA, 1914–1931, by *Isak Dinesen.* Ed. by *Frans Lasson.* Trans. by *Anne Born.* University of Chicago Press. $25.00. SAND RIVERS, by *Peter Matthiessen.* Photographs by *Hugo van Lawick.* Viking. $19.95.

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Sounds *rather* beastly! Yet it was a refreshingly honest admission that she was fundamentally a snob in a world without profiles. The pity is, she more often tried to conceal this from herself and others, with the result that these letters, humorless anyway, desperately embrace tolerant convictions while her private self all the time disbelieved them. She seems to have been anxious to meliorate between her mother's generation and her sister's, to convince them both that there was "a really fine time ahead for women and that the next hundred years will bring many glorious revelations to them." Radical feminists will find an abundance of paragraphs in these letters to be quoted as evidence that Karen Blixen was a forerunner, so long as they are prepared to ignore the authentic sound of final contradiction! "I think that the women of the old days . . . felt themselves to be representatives of something great and sacred, by virtue of which they possessed importance outside themselves and could feel great pride and dignity and toward which they had a weighty responsibility."

On a number of subjects she was peculiarly fickle, forever letting circumstances alter cases. (Perhaps out of courtesy she suppressed the principles to which she was unalterably educated.) On the British character, for example, she changed her mind a dozen times, first dismissing it as totally Philistine; after meeting Denys Finch-Hatton (to whom she became engaged) and his ruling-class circle, she admired the English "for their inspired understanding of their own nature and the completely unperturbed way they live in accordance with it." The truth of the matter, which she knew but couldn't seem to hold on to, was that she judged by class rather than by nationality; the colonial *middle-class* of *any* country is deadly boring!

What is above all notable in these letters from a latent artist is her refusal to accept tragedy—as a concept, that is! The fate of her father, her crackup with Blixen, her failure to commit herself to Finch-Hatton (for which she invented a thousand rationalizations), his death in an airplane accident and at the same time the definitive economic crisis which ended her seventeen-years sojourn in Africa: all this one is tempted to call tragic. Yet in these letters, she steadfastly denies the tragic sense of life and in no instance is her denial more vehement, or more incomprehensible, than in her first ferocious reaction to the historical novels of Sigrid Undset which exhibited, in her opinion, "a despicable view of life," derived, she insists, from Undset's "fear of the Devil . . . or other fear of hell that is still in her blood, inherited from the Norwegian Middle Ages." So much for the Christian ethos, to say nothing of Aristotle! As a literary critic Dinesen was too bizarre even to be interesting. Like D. H. Lawrence, but somewhat less plausibly, she argued with characters in books as if they led a life of their own it was her appointed duty to set straight.

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Deprivation of caste or income was the only calamity she was ready to call fatal. "I would consent to lose a leg in order to have an income of £5000 a year." To contract syphilis and to have but one leg were worth the title of Baroness and a comfortable income; we are in the presence of a curiously self-mutilating personality. When, at last, she had to face the sale of her farm and her return to Denmark, virtually penniless, she swore to her brother, Thomas, that she would commit suicide rather than live without means or if, untrained in anything practical, she had somehow to earn her livelihood. But for the grace of God (or of Thomas, whom she frequently confused with Him), the "Isak" Dinesen familiar to her readers would have never been born. (She had by then started the "Gothic" tales; apparently she was not confident of her future as a story writer.) With the income her brother provided, she was enabled to reconstruct herself in Denmark and to become the fabulist who wrote the euphemistic memoir, *Out of Africa*, and those elegant fantasies which were as far from the Europe of nineteenth-century evangelism and post-World War I liberalism as they were from Africa. The Europe of *Seven Gothic Tales* and of *Winter's Tales* is a Europe of the Witches' Sabbath, of Ludwig II and Baroque illusionism, of Hans Christian Andersen and the Nordic frost.

These are not among the memorable letters of our time; they have not the effortless manner that eases letters into literature. Except where she is gossiping about her black household or recounting the pleasures of safari, they are charmless; they have a one-way imperiousness that invites no answer. Difficult it is to imagine what her mother, her aunt or her brother *replied* to these *obiter dicta*. They are in a certain sense sadly fascinating if you need to watch an artist in chrysalis dreaming, not that she's a butterfly but that she's George Bernard Shaw. For my taste, I would have welcomed more of the daily East African life. Dinesen is much more readable when watching the light go out in the eyes of a dying lion than when she is expounding a mystique she calls "homogenous sex" or when she is explaining why she finds *The Forsyte Saga* detestable. And her parenthetical accounts of a condition no doubt commonplace in Africa—the omnipresence of death—are often enthralling. Finding a small strange boy sitting in the dark, miles from anywhere, tired out and with damaged feet, she drives him to the hospital, and notes almost casually: "If we had not picked him up, the hyenas would have got him during the night."

When Isak Dinesen left Africa in 1931 the shadows had not yet lengthened on the plains of Kenya. Peter Matthiessen's Africa, in *Sand Rivers*, is not far, as the vulture flies, from Isak Dinesen's, but fifty years have intervened and with them the last act of the long African tragedy—called independence. Matthiessen was invited, in 1979, to join what the sponsor called "the last safari into the last wilderness," namely the Selous Game Preserve, largest remaining

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wild-life sanctuary on the continent, and to extend the hunt with a walk into territory untrodden by white men before, in the company of an ex-gamewarden, Brian Nicholson, and the eminent photographer, Baron Hugo von Lawick. As anyone who has read *The Snow Leopard* will recall, Matthiessen combines the exhaustive knowledge of the naturalist (he knows the *names* of *everything*—bird, bush and mammal!) with a poet's response to far-out landscapes. Since the country into which he trekked on this occasion is in one of the new African republics, Tanzania, his book has the twin appeal of a travelogue and a political footnote. Matthiessen confesses to being a sentimental American who would like to argue the cause of Africa for the black Africans. In view of the damaging evidence that accumulates before his eyes or in the reminders of Nicholson, who has spent a lifetime in British East Africa and lately fought a losing battle against native indifference or mismanagement, he does not insist on his thesis. At the time of his arrival, Kenya was desperately struggling to recover from the epidemic poaching and plunder of the 1970s. In Uganda, the Tanzanian forces which were stranded there after an eight-months war against Idi Amin Dada (rumored to be in the Sudan with 3,000 of his troops) were without supplies or pay and were not only looting the local population as severely as Amin's soldiery had done but also were butchering the wild animals in the great Ruwenzori and Kabalega Falls National Parks—at first for food, then for profit, slaughtering hippo, antelope, buffalo, elephant and lion with machine guns and selling the meat, the skins and the ivory. A wild-life biologist arriving in Nairobi reported that in his opinion the Ruwenzori National Park would be dead in three weeks. In view of this sickening news, Matthiessen decides that "the last safari" might not be too exaggerated a subtitle for his venture.

Sand Rivers is not a political critique of contemporary Africa; it is among the *journeys back* which have distinguished the trek literature of a hundred years and more, from Mungo Park to Evelyn Waugh and Bruce Chatwin. Yet the political implications which, we gather, Matthiessen and Nicholson not infrequently raised on their long walk, are unavoidable, since the copious animal and bird life which Matthiessen is rehearsing is more than ever before dependent for its survival on human administration, and administration is nothing less than imagination translating the desirable into the operative. Nicholson would like to place his confidence in the occasional Tanzania Game Department official appointed by socialist management who has not been brainwashed to obstruct as a matter of course the "European" experience, but he fears there are not enough of them. Gloomily he observes that already, since his retirement in 1973, the hour of the poacher has been invoked: ninety percent of the Reserve's vehicles have been lost to mechanical breakdown and not replaced, air strips and foot patrols have been abandoned, main tracks have been allowed to grow over and deteriorate, burning-off

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to produce new pasture for grazing has not been systematically maintained. Hence, Matthiessen's narrative, told in the wide-awake terms of a teeming, continuous present, can be read as an elegy for tomorrow, an impression enforced by the autumnal tone of Hugo von Lawick's marvellous pictures, as if the menace as well as the beauty had been photographed just before the last sunset seen by mankind.[2]

Matthiessen, himself, perhaps feeling that he'll never get another chance to name everything as he sees it, tends to load his paragraphs with more rare birds and insects than any but a specialized reader can identify. When he pauses to relate one marvel to another and senses the particular merging into the general, his command of color, sound and substance conjures the resonance of the vast continental space. "Big pink-and-lavender grasshoppers rise and sail away on the hot wind, the burning of their flight as dry and scratchy as the long grass and the baked black rock, the hard red lateritic earth, the crust of Africa." He is wonderful when recreating the alternate silence and clatter of an African night, and uncommon, I think, in any gathering of prose landscape writing is his talent for actualizing the *sounds* of wild life: "The early morning sound of a ground hornbill, the remote dim hooting of a woodland spirit, poo-too, po-to"; the "trilling" of a tiny scrops owl; the "high, eerie giggling" of hyenas; the "nasal, puffing snort" emitted by kangoni; the "peculiar, sneezing bark" made by the impala; the "ominous chinking" of a tinker bird; the "squalling and explosive *chack*" of four boubous chasing through a bush; the "harsh racket" of a roller; the "deep, tearing coughs of a restless leopard," and "the see-saw creaking of the *coqui francolin*."

As one would expect, he records, like Dinesen, the perpetual cohabitation of life and death, glimpsed at any hour within the same frame: as in this, one of many such terminal vignettes, a crocodile leisurely returning to feed on

> a hippo's carcass . . . stranded like a huge rubber toy on a hidden bar out in mid-river . . . The crocodile was in no hurry . . . now waiting for the hippopotamus to soften. When it lifted its spiny back and tail out of the water, we could see that it was ten or twelve feet long, and now the big head was elevated, too, with the teeth protruding from the long, saurian smile; the smile begins in a small loop beneath the brow knob that contains the crocodile's modest brain and stony eyes. Nearing the carcass it sank from view to take a bite, then surfaced again, approaching the white pasty throat, as a Goliath heron and a palm-nut vulture crossed

[2] For a book that precisely confirms Nicholson's misgivings at the political and social level in East Africa, the morbidly interested reader should consult Shiva Naipaul's compact chronicle of disdain: *North of South: An African Journey* (Simon and Schuster, 1979).

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the foul air, oblivious, and trumpeter hornbills came to the wild date palms by the river, and a pied wagtail tipped and chirruped on a river log greased by primordial mud.

All this (and Dinesen, too) takes on a more haunted interest for the reader who is aware that this region of Africa—comprising Mt. Kenya and Mt. Kilimanjaro, the Serengeti plain, the slave routes to Zanzibar, the sources of the Nile—is alive with associations of past encounters. It was within this area that Speke, in 1861, arrived at the unspeakable kingdom of Buganda (today's Uganda) with its pervert ruler, Mutesa, who buried living wives with their beheaded husbands; where Henry Morton Stanley caught up with Dr. Livingston and, later, travelling north on what he thought was the Nile, found that he was on the Congo. And it is within this quadrangle of territory that a recent school of anthropologists has alleged to have located the home of our immediate ancestor—the killer ape.

Notes on Contributors

RICHARD MOORE* teaches at The New England Conservatory of Music. His third poetry collection, *Empires*, is due in February from The Ontario Review Press; a narrative poem, *The Education of a Mouse*, will be published by The Countryman Press later in 1982.

HARVEY SHAPIRO's books of poetry include *Battle Report*, *This World*, and *Lauds & Nightsounds*. He has just completed a new collection, tentatively entitled *A Jerusalem Notebook and Other Poems*.

LOUIS SIMPSON's most recent book of poetry is *Caviare at the Funeral*, published by Franklin Watts. A collection of his literary criticism, *A Company of Poets*, appeared this year from the University of Michigan Press.

JON STALLWORTHY* and PETER FRANCE*, whose translation of Pasternak's *Selected Poems* will be published this year, have also translated Alexander Blok's *The Twelve and Other Poems* (1970). Mr. Stallworthy is Anderson Professor of English Literature at Cornell; his other published works include five books of his own poems, two critical studies of Yeats's poetry, and a biography, *Wilfred Owen*. Peter France is Professor of French at Edinburgh and the author of *Racine's Rhetoric* (1965) and *Rhetoric and Truth in France* (1972).

JUDITH HEMSCHEMEYER has published two books of poems—*I Remember the Room Was Filled with Light*, and *Very Close and Very Slow*—both from Wesleyan University Press. As the 1981–82 Hodder Fellow at Princeton University, she is engaged in translating the complete poems of Anna Akhmatova. ANNE WILKINSON*, her co-translator, teaches at Santa Barbara City College.

ROBERT LUHN* is a free-lance writer and broadcaster living in Northern California. His current projects include a series of articles about Robert Benchley for *Paper Cinema* magazine and a piece on Billy Wilder, forthcoming in *American Film*.

JEAN NORDHAUS* lives in Washington, D. C. and coordinates the poetry programs at the Folger Shakespeare Library.

Harry Duncan's Abattoir Editions is publishing GREG KUZMA's long poem on the death of his brother Jeff, sections of which appeared in this magazine.

ROBERT ASAHINA is an editor of *The New York Times Book Review*.

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STEVEN HELMLING

Ferocious Alphabets

THE IMPASSE BETWEEN PROFESSORS OF LITERATURE and the public at large, even that subset of it called the reading public, has been evident for some time now; more recent—and, according to your beholding eye, either more disturbing or more laughable—are the fissures opening between the professors, too, under the impact of a handful of European philosophers and literary theorists. Once upon a time, when the doctors disagreed, they did so in a common language; nowadays, the very vocabularies heard on either side of the rift are the first objects of dispute, one side closing its ears to the corrupt platitudes of a bourgeois humanism, the other turning up its nose at a barbaric "scientistic" jargon. Under such conditions, views are not exchanged in measured and accommodating words; rather, allegiances are signalled by code words waved like red flags before bulls. We have not a debate, but a sort of war of religion. And all blasting away without attracting the slightest interest from non-professionals—until someone was denied tenure at Cambridge was it? That got some press. "Tempest in a teapot" was the predictable formula; the public was stroked once again, thank you Dr. Pavlov, to the view that the response properly elicited by the word "professor" is a display of amusement of some faint sort. On the facing page, a more positive reinforcement: an ad for status jeans, say, or "fun furs." Cowboy boots are big in New York just now. In desperate moods it can seem that if our better advertised academic literati are the hierophants of an unapprehended futurity, we're in trouble. How much more comforting to think that they and their venom-filled teapots are just what they seem, a trivial and contemptible irrelevancy. But of course such comfort is no comfort at all. "More substance in our enmities/Than in our loves": that's always a sobering accusation, but in the case of enmities so vain and so petty, the expense of spirit seems especially pointless.

Denis Donoghue's new book, *Ferocious Alphabets*,[1] addresses itself with widely-informed reasonableness, patience, and generosity to the present situation of highbrow literary criticism and theory. Simply to praise the book in these terms is to announce what side of the fight it's on; add that in its pages you will find words like "will," "faith," "truth," soul," and "wisdom," and you've declared only the most provocative items in Donoghue's emphatically humanistic baggage. The book's provocations are deliberate, of course, but not at

[1] FEROCIOUS ALPHABETS, by *Denis Donoghue*. Little, Brown. $14.95.

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all gratuitous. Donoghue is no cheerleader; he earns his language, and his motives are severally admirable: to establish some common ground from which to address all the parties in dispute; to accommodate the new continental criticism to the concerns of recent Anglo-American critics; to show the acolytes of *la nouvelle critique* that if one hasn't been converted, it isn't necessarily because one hasn't read (or has read but hasn't understood) Messieurs Barthes, Derrida, Foucault, etc. I haven't been able to help making *Ferocious Alphabets* sound belligerent, but it aims to be a peace-making book. One can only wish it luck in an arena where "peace" is a fighting word.

A blurb on the cover pronounces *Ferocious Alphabets* "extraordinarily available to the average reader," and Donoghue announces at the outset that he wants to allow "elbowroom to a figure commonly despised, the naive realist." The table of contents discloses that the book consists principally of short essays, seventeen of them, on figures ranging from Hopkins, Mallarmé and T. S. Eliot to Harold Bloom, Paul De Man, and Jacques Derrida. But the "average reader" would be mistaken to suppose that *Ferocious Alphabets* is a handbook, or a survey. Some of the essays could plausibly serve as introductions to the critics they treat, but most plunge immediately into discussions that assume an already initiated reader. Nor, despite the generally chronological arrangement of the seventeen figures, is the book in any sense a history of how we've arrived at our present pass. The seventeen essays are discrete; connections between one critic and another are suggested only incidentally if at all. Some of the essays are brilliant—the one on Bloom is the best thing I've read on Bloom—but others can be rather routine. Some take up matters that seem peripheral to the particular critic as well as to the arguments of *Ferocious Alphabets* itself, and a couple of the critics included are simply lightweights, about whom nothing Donoghue finds to say removes an initial sense that they just don't belong here.

The book's studied casualness is deliberate, and pays off: in discussing critics so diverse, Donoghue quite rightly wants to be able to say whatever seems most to need saying at a given moment, without obligations to some proposed thesis or scheme. But having read the book twice, I'll say that it's neither so casual as it seemed on first reading, nor quite so deliberate as, on a second reading, it seemed to me it ought to be. The first time through it seemed a very miscellaneous collection of things indeed; it begins by transcribing six brief radio talks Donoghue gave for the BBC about language, its decline, its oddities, and so on. I initially took these as a gesture toward that "average reader," an Antaeus-like touching of earth before grappling with a subject sure to bear discussion very quickly aloft. The six talks have charm, and they're unblighted by that public-spirited self-congratulation that makes American workouts in the genre so repellent but they're basically the same sort of perform-

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ance. Suffice it to say that this was the part of the book that John Simon, in his review for the *Atlantic*, liked best. After the six talks comes a fifteen page "Commentary on the Foregoing," in which Donoghue uses his own talks, and his difficulties composing them, as instances of the rhetorical awkwardness of addressing an audience that one can only imagine, an audience not actually present, and offering no feedback or response. The point of the exercise, of course, is that this awkwardness is much like—but also unlike—that of a writer composing a text to be read by persons unknown at some future time. Here opens what some folks like to call "the radical problematic of writing": Donoghue would like to close this aperture, but is properly unsure how, or whether, it can be done. He begins the next section of his book, "Communication, Communion, Conversation," by insisting firmly that speech and print are distinct, that "print is a silent medium" and "does not expect to be answered. No eccentricity is involved in a page of written words or print, there is a decorum ready to receive such things . . ." I take this to mean that what Derrida calls *différance*—the irony by which, necessarily, writing "defers" the presence it aims to summon, and simultaneously alters, makes "different," what it's meant to transcribe exactly—is sufficiently mediated by conventions any sophisticated reader has thought through. The "absence of presence" that is the post-structuralist's new-found scandal is really quite an old story, and can seem novel only to those who naively literalize conventions of literary address, who don't realize that the convention that writing summons the presence of the living voice has always been self-conscious.

Writing is not speech then; but within a page Donoghue seems to be saying what amounts to the same thing: "I want," he writes, "to replace a theory of communication by a theory of communion, and to argue that what writers want is the system of exchange which I [call] conversation." No Derridean would pause for breath before attacking this as yet another rhetoric of "presence." But the point of Donoghue's contrast between "communication" and "communion" or "conversation," a point so casually implied that if I hadn't been reading with a reviewer's eye I'd have missed it, is that the Derridean assault is mounted against linguistic theories of communication, like DeSaussure's or Jacobson's, that lay stress on the transitivity of the message: a datum transmitted intact (ideally) from source to destination. "Conversation" promotes instead an intransitive "communion," in which words are exchanged not for the sake of the meanings or messages they bear, but rather to enact and celebrate the affection and participation that is producing and produced by them.[2] Very well; still for the solitary writer brooding over

[2] The transitive-intransitive figure is not Donoghue's; I borrow it from Roland Barthes, whose notion of the reader's "pleasure" is a response to the same linguistic scientism that has prompted Donoghue's "conversation" and "communion."

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a mute page, that "radical problematic" is still, arguably, at work, as Donoghue concedes in his next section, "Style as Compensation." Here Donoghue examines passages from half a dozen critics, discerning in them traces of the awkwardness of addressing an audience the writer must imagine, even in a sense create. That awkwardness is what "style" acts as "compensation" for.

Here, and in this tentative state, Donoghue abandons his book's most suggestive—and, of course, most troublesome—theme. The next two sections, "Epireading" and "Graphireading," are less than the culminating statement the book seems to lead to: if the two very useful neologisms are original with Donoghue, still the distinction they help us name has long been evident. "Epireaders" are those like Donoghue, who look in their reading for communion with a voice, an authorial presence. "Graphireaders" are those who insist that all is text, that voice, presence, author, and so on, are bourgeois impositions sponsoring the perpetuation of all things corrupt and contemptible. Donoghue identifies, as the ur-fathers respectively of these two schools, Hopkins and Mallarmé; the more contemporary representatives are Georges Poulet and, of course, Derrida.

The Poulet-Derrida polarity Donoghue would mediate with the notion of "conversation." Observe that what used to be called New Criticism is given no role to play here. When Donoghue does discuss critics of that now very unfashionable persuasion, it is only as examples of "Style as Compensation"; his fondness, even nostalgia, for their work is evident, but once the talk turns philosophic, they are bid a firm farewell. I wonder how much of the current embarrassment over New Criticism is due to the tendency, which I associate with M. H. Abrams and Frank Lentricchia, to regard it as a species of Kantianism (shameful stuff, that!) rather than as what it was, a compound of English skepticism and American pragmatism. (What is taken to be its Kantianism is a mere garnish, an entirely artificial fideism, very much an efflorescence of that "humanism" T. S. Eliot couldn't quite disown.) Certainly New Criticism, if that must mean Wimsattian dogmatisms or interminable "close readings," is long gone. But the awareness it had, stemming from Oscar Wilde and the Augustans, of conventions and their self-consciousness, is just what current discussion lacks. "Deconstruction" exposes just what the fictiveness of self-conscious literary conventions has always acknowledged; its attraction for some is that it does so from a posture of alienation from, rather than communion with, the texts (and by extension, the tradition) it examines. This pose is, from Donoghue's vantage point, a failure, even a deliberate abortion, of sympathy and (forgotten word) "imagination." "The conflict among the alphabets of criticism today turns upon the question of imagination," he concludes; "Graphireaders want to get along without acknowledging the creative imagination; because if they acknowledged it, they could not stop short of acknowledging a complete

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humanism of mind, consciousness, and genius. Is it still a question of Romanticism, then? Yes; but of Romanticism as a permanent category, not as something to be defined by renewing the old paper-war with Classicism."

I conclude with that last quote because its energy, at once so casual and so high-rolling, is a feature of *Ferocious Alphabets* that I haven't at all so far done justice to. I have seemed to complain that Donoghue's book is too casual for its own good, that its arguments don't quite tie up loose ends; I have apologized for making it sound belligerent, then seemed to chide it for being less belligerent than it should be. All of which is to say that I have responded here to *Ferocious Alphabets* as an argument or a complex of arguments, reviewed it, that is, under the category Donoghue has disdained as "communication": as a set of messages to be transmitted, whole if possible, to the receiving *tabulae rasae* of its intended readers. My criticisms on that score, though, don't begin to suggest what the reader will have to experience, after all, at first hand: the charm and intimacy with which Donoghue's prose enacts its own celebration of "conversation." Its geniality and ease, its vigor and scope, prompted me to reach for the word "humane," and to remember that the theory-ridden and increasingly acrimonious discipline of literary study is still called one of the "humanities." The value of the book is not in its larger arguments, but in the fluency and large-mindedness, page by page, of its broodings. Few books of literary criticism—fewer and fewer all the time—are at all pleasurable to read, or converse with. *Ferocious Alphabets* is both, and I've much enjoyed talking back.

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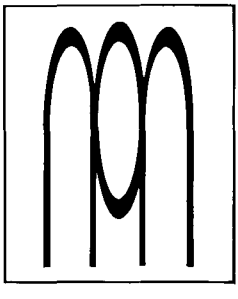

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